NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

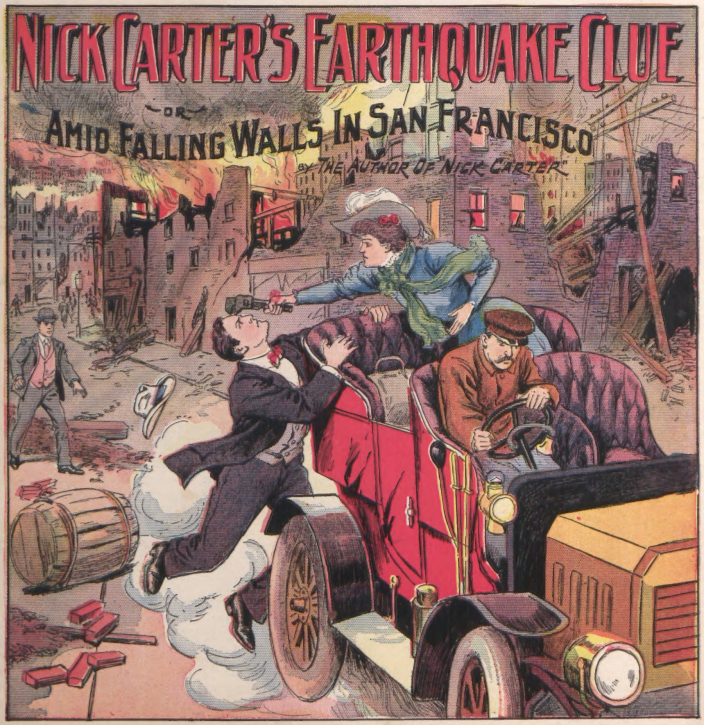
No. 503 NEW YORK, AUGUST 18, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

NICK CARTER'S EARTHQUAKE CLUE

OR

AMID FALLING WALLS IN SAN FRANCISCO

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



The woman seized a wrench lying at her feet and, leaning over, struck the detective a savage blow between the eyes.

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NICK CARTER'S EARTHQUAKE CLUE

OR,

Amid Falling Walls in San Francisco.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

A locomotive, pulling a northbound passenger train, was slowly shortening the loop of steep Tehachapi, and would soon be on the summit and prepared for the rapid descent and the dash across the plains to Bakersfield, Stockton, and San Francisco.

A passenger in one of the Pullmans was reading a letter as the mountain climb was being made. He was a smooth-faced, keen-eyed man of middle age, and was dressed in a brown business suit. The letter had been placed in his hands at one of the stations south of the Tehachapi, and had been brought there by a mounted messenger. Its contents caused the reader to frown.

"I'll have to oblige him, I suppose," he said to himself, "but it will interfere with my other arrangements. What a fool he is. I had a higher opinion of his intelligence."

The man was sitting by an open window, and at this moment the coach turned sharply around a bend, and a gust of wind caught the letter held loosely in his hand and took it through the window and up in the air.

The passenger, with an expression of mingled annoyance and disgust, saw the paper float along until finally it lodged in the branches of a large, wide-spreading pine at some distance from the railroad-track.

The resting-place of the letter appeared to relieve the man's mind. There was no road or trail near the spot, and its isolated position gave promise that it would not be found for a long time, if ever. "If it remains in that tree but two days, no, one day, its contents will be without value to the finder, if he should happen to be dishonest and daring."

At Fresno, the man who had lost the letter alighted from the train and was driven to the leading hotel. He was eating his dinner, with no thought of what he had lost, and yet at that moment two men, travel-stained and weary, who were wanted by the police of Los Angeles, were climbing the hill toward the tree which held the letter. The day had been very warm, and they were seeking shade and coolness. The tree would furnish both.

One of the men was on the shady side of fifty, and tall and powerfully built. His hair and beard were gray, he had a seamed and weather-beaten face, and from under shaggy, overhanging brows two eyes, light-blue, keen, cold, and conscienceless, looked out and scanned the surroundings.

The other man was under thirty, with dark hair and eyes, and a weak, reckless countenance.

"I can't see far enough," said the elder man to his companion. "Climb that tree—you are younger and lighter than I am—and make sure that we are in a safe place."

The command, for such it was, was instantly obeyed. The younger man climbed the pine, saw the letter, put it in his pocket, then allowed his eyes to rove up the mountain and down it. Seeing nothing of a disturbing nature, he called out: "Everything is all right. Nobody in sight."

"I think we are hunky-dory," remarked the elder man, after the younger had descended the tree. "That ride we stole from Mojave will likely throw the sheriff off the scent. Hello! What's that you have in your hand?" The younger man had drawn out the letter, and was about to open and read it.

"Something I found in the tree. Must have blown there. Love-letter, likely."

As he read it his eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Holy smoke! Terrin," he ejaculated, "but here's a chance for somebody. One hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars waiting for some enterprising gazabo who is foot-loose and has got the nerve."

He put the letter in his pocket, and grinned at his companion.

"Hand over that paper, Dick," commanded the other harshly. "Don't get gay with me."

The young man backed away a few steps. The grin had broadened.

"I'll give it to you in a minute, Terrin," he said, his eyes sparkling, "but before I do, I would like to ask you a question. Have you had enough of train hold-ups?"

"I wouldn't tackle another job of that kind for all the bullion in California."

The tone was emphatic. The young man nodded his head approvingly.

"I thought you would say that," he returned soberly. "The experience we have had has not given us a high opinion of hold-ups as a field of pecuniary endeavor. Three times have we tried to pull off a train job, and three times have we failed to make the riffle. You have been shot twice and jailed once. Thanks to me, you escaped out of the pen, and, thanks to me, you are now breathing the free air under a mountain pine."

"I am not unmindful of your friendly efforts," grunted Terrin, "but at the same time I don't want you to forget that it was your cussed amateurishness which spoilt the last job. But"—as he noticed the frown on his companion's face—"you did the best you knew how, and so there's no use in kicking. You were hunting experience, and you have got it."

"I certainly have." With these words he handed the letter to Terrin.

The elder man took the paper, and his emotion as he mastered the contents were dominated by impotent rage.

"A fortune in sight, and we can't touch it," he snarled. "Dick, I feel like going up to the railway-track, lying across the rails, and letting the next train run over me. This letter has spoilt my day. I am the modern Tantalus." And then he indulged in some strong language.

The letter which had so greatly exercised him was written by the treasurer of one of the southern counties of the State, and the date was of the day before. It read as follows:

"Mr. James D. Plass.

"My Dear Jim: Yours of the tenth, stating that you will leave Flagstaff for San Francisco to-day, comes in so pat with an important arrangement of mine that I am going to ask you to do me a great favor, one which will necessitate a delay of twenty-four hours in your traveling program. My town is off the main line, so I shall send this to you by a mounted messenger, who will strike your train at Mojave.

"Here is the situation: By the law of the State I am compelled every quarter to turn over all State moneys in my possession to the State treasurer at Sacramento. Heretofore, I have had the cash transported by the express company, but the charges have been so high that I have determined this time to be my own messenger, and myself take the money to the State capital. I have had the funds put in the form of national bank-notes, and intend to place them in a suit-case, and never allow the case to leave my sight. One of our detectives has business in Fresno, and will accompany me in the Pullman as far as that city. Now, if you will stop off at Fresno, wait for my train—it will come along to-morrow afternoon—and be my companion for the rest of the journey, I shall feel that I am running no risks in undertaking the custody of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. I know you will oblige me. We have been friends too long to make me doubt what your action will be. As for the business part of the affair, we will arrange that when I meet you.

"Yours, as of old,

"Frank Gayton."

Dick Hatterly read the letter a second time. Suddenly his brow cleared. He drew a deep breath.

"Terrin," said he quickly, "I've got an idea. There's a chance for us. Of course, there are risks to be run, but who would not risk even his neck to collar one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars?"

"What is it? Spit it out, Dick." Terrin was on his feet, a hopeful excitement in his face.

Hatterly stepped forward, and began to whisper rapidly into Terrin's ear. There was no need for whispering, but the young man must have believed that the very birds might carry off his secret, for he spoke so low that a

yellowhammer on a branch not ten feet from his head could not have heard him.

Terrin listened to the communication, and seemed struck by it. After it had been given, he said: "Dick, I never gave you credit for a superabundance of intelligence, but what you have said shows that I must revise my estimate of your abilities. You are certainly coming on. There is a chance for us. It's a risk, a big risk, for there isn't an officer in this part of the State but has our descriptions. But the game is worth the venture. I think I can make it."

The next day Frank Gayton, the county treasurer, was a passenger on the northbound train. His only baggage consisted of a suit-case. There was room in it for the bank-notes and his few personal effects.

A detective from his own town had accompanied him, and the journey to Fresno was made without incident.

Here the detective left the train, and his place was taken by the treasurer's friend, James D. Plass.

The train made good time during the night, and at early morning reached Sacramento. Gayton and his friend were driven to the Capitol Hotel, and at ten o'clock the two men, Gayton with the suit-case in his hand, proceeded to the office of the State treasurer in the capitol building.

Here on the counter the suit-case was opened.

The county treasurer thrust in his hand, withdrew it with an expression of amazement and alarm, then looked into the receptacle to utter a cry of acute despair.

The bank-notes were not there.

CHAPTER II.

NICK MEETS WITH A SURPRISE.

Nick Carter, the great detective, sat in the reception-room of his quarters in a private house, Mission Street, San Francisco, and lazily puffed at a cigar. Opposite to him sat Chick, engaged in a smiliar nerve-soothing occupation.

They had reached the metropolis the evening before, having traveled from the city of Mexico, where they had successfully concluded a secret undertaking for a wealthy mine-owner, whose home was in New York.

"I have a mind to stay here in San Francisco a week," said Nick. "I need a rest, and so do you. What do you say?"

"I am with you," was the reply. "A week with nothing to do but enjoy ourselves—that appeals to me. No business, no intricate problems, no bother, no working body and mind, no care, all peace, et cetera."

"What you say would sound better if it had come from some one else, Chick, for I honestly believe you would rather work than eat. Stagnation would kill you."

"I sha'n't stagnate, Nick. I'll find enough to occupy my mind."

"But *my* program does not contemplate mind occupation. I intend to give my mind a rest."

"Rest goes, then."

The words were hardly out of Chick's mouth before the telephone-bell tinkled.

Nick, with an expression of annoyance, arose, and, with the receiver at his ear, heard the chief of police say: "That you, Nick?"

"Yes."

"Good. I have a big case for you."

"I'd rather not take it. Am not doing any business at present. Give the case to some local man."

"No local detective is smart enough to tackle it. Besides, the man who is interested insists on having you."

"Does he? Well, tell him I must disappoint him. I am here for a rest, and I intend to get it."

"I sympathize with you, Nick; but this man, Frank Gayton, says he is a boyhood friend of yours, and that he'll be awfully disappointed if you refuse to help him. He is in a big lot of trouble."

"Frank Gayton, eh? Well, that's a horse of another color. Send him down here, and I'll hear what he has got to say."

"All right. He didn't know you were in the city until I told him, and then he fairly jumped for joy. He'll be with you inside of half an hour."

"Frank Gayton," explained Nick to Chick, after the great detective had hung up the receiver, "is one of the best fellows that ever lived. I haven't seen him for ten years. He is an old schoolmate of mine, and we were boyhood chums. Of course, I'll help him. I wonder what his trouble is?"

"Tell me what his business is, and I may hazard a guess."

"He holds some county office in the south, I believe; treasurer, if I am not mistaken."

"Then he has been robbed."

"Probably. He was robbed when he was a boy, and I as a boy did my first detective work in finding the thief and recovering the money. Frank had a little savings-bank, one of those metal affairs, and he had been saving his pennies and nickels for over a year, until he had several dollars in the bank. One day he went to the bank to make a deposit of two cents, which he had earned by holding the horse of a rich neighbor. He was cast into the depths of despair to find that his bank had been smashed and all the money stolen.

"When I heard of the loss I made up my mind I would find the thief. I suspected the son of a widow who lived next door. He was a bright fellow, ranked higher than Frank at school, but we never took to him. He was sneaky, up to mean tricks, and had been a source of trouble to his mother, a most estimable woman.

"I won't go into details, but simply say that I traced the theft to Dan Terrin, and made him return the stolen

money. Out of consideration for Mrs. Terrin, there was no prosecution, but soon after Dan was sent to the reform school, having been detected in another theft. When he became a man he went utterly to the bad. He has been a notorious gun for years. You have probably heard of him."

"Indeed I have, and that reminds me. When the train stopped at one of the stations in the San Joaquin Valley I saw a man on the platform who resembled Dan Terrin. He was well dressed, and standing behind a post, but I saw his face when he turned to look into the window of one of the Pullmans."

"Why didn't you speak to me about it?" asked Nick, rather sharply.

"You weren't in the car with me at the time. You had gone forward to speak to the engineer, an old Boston & Maine man. We hadn't had any dealings with the fellow, and when you came back I'd forgot then all about the matter."

"Your explanation is entirely satisfactory," returned Nick, with a smile, "but your talk about Terrin makes me all the more anxious to see Gayton and hear his story."

Fifteen minutes later the treasurer arrived and was heartily greeted by Nick Carter. Chick was introduced, and then Gayton, whose face was very pale, and whose manner was nervous, said quickly: "I am awfully glad to see you, Nick, and I would like to spend a whole day talking over old times, but I must ease my mind at once, for I am in need of your services. I have been robbed of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars." And then the story of the suit-case was told.

Nick's countenance was grave, as he said: "You are handing me a mystery, and a pretty deep one, I imagine."

"But your strong suit is a mystery."

"Yes, I like mysteries. They stimulate the brain."

"Then you'll like this one," put in Chick. "It's a hummer, all right."

Gayton, in answer to Nick's questions, said that the case had never left his possession, had never been out of his sight during the long trip to Sacramento.

"I took the notes from the safe of the country treasury, counted them, to make sure they were all there as I had left them the night before, packed them in the suit-case, and with it in my hand went to the train. The case never left my side for one minute while I was in the Pullman. When I had occasion to get up my suit-case got up with me, and went where I did. I had two detectives on the trip, one to Fresno, and the other from Fresno to Sacramento, and I might occasionally have left the case with one of them. But I did not do so."

"And yet the notes must have been abstracted during the train journey," said Nick.

Gayton could not dispute this statement.

"I'll have to admit that," he replied. "And yet I don't see how it was possible for any one to have made an attempt to remove the notes without my knowing it. In fact, though it has been done, it seems to me that it couldn't have been done. Even if I had slept, and my detective had slept, and neither of us did, the case could not have been opened without cutting it with a knife, for it had a peculiar lock and I had the key."

"Are you sure the case was not cut?" asked Nick.

"Yes. It is in as good condition now as when it left the county seat. It was unlocked and the notes taken out and a bundle of blank paper substituted."

"Might there not have been a substitution of cases? There are probably thousands of suit-cases in use, each of the exact pattern of the one you took away from your home down south."

"No, it was my case, for there was the peculiar lock. There isn't another lock like it in the United States. I'll swear that there was no substitution."

Nick thought a moment. Then he said: "These two detectives—are they men of probity?"

"Lafe Bennett, who accompanied me to Fresno, is a pioneer Californian, and is as square as a die. Our ride to Fresno was during daylight, and all the way he rode in a seat next beyond mind. He never touched the case while he was in the car."

"And the other? Who and what is he?"

"Jim Plass, of the express company."

"Plass? You need not try to give him a good reputation. I know him, and his honesty is beyond question."

"It appears to me," remarked Chick, "that the suit-case affair is about as hard a one as we have ever come up against. I think it is about time to dig up a clue."

"Can you suggest one?"

"I was thinking of Dan Terrin. He was down south somewhere when Mr. Gayton started out with his valuable suit-case. Maybe he knows where the money has gone to."

Frank Gayton was surprised to hear mentioned the name of Dan Terrin. He had a keen recollection of what had happened during his boyhood days, and his face fell as he thought of what the evil-minded fellow's presence in southern California might mean.

Chick's explanation of his statement increased Gayton's apprehensions.

"You must have seen Terrin at a station south of Fresno," he said. "And he might have boarded the train from that point."

"He might," returned Nick's assistant, "for I had my eye on him but a moment."

Gayton sighed, and then looked at Nick. The latter was thoughtfully stroking his chin.

"Terrin's presence below Fresno at that particular time has some significance," he said, "but it fails to solve the mystery of the robbery. He did not go into Frank's Pullman, and he never had a chance, according to Frank's

story, to even see the suit-case. One more question," addressing the treasurer, "who were the other passengers in your car after the train left Fresno?"

"There were only two of us," was the answer, "myself and Jim Plass. From my town to Fresno the number was the same, Lafe Bennett occupying the place afterward taken by Plass."

"Of course, many passengers having seats in the other coaches passed through your Pullman?" said Nick.

"Yes, from time to time, one or more passed through."

"Did you notice them particularly?"

"I did, for my nerves were on edge in spite of the fact that I had a guard. I can state positively that no one bearing even a remote resemblance to Dan Terrin went through the car."

Nick turned to Chick. "Did you see Terrin before the train stopped, or afterward?"

"He was behind the post as the train pulled into the station. I couldn't see his face then, and it struck me as peculiar that the man should try to conceal himself in such a place. It looked as if he was anxious to avoid recognition by somebody on the train."

"We may consider one point settled," said Nick. "Terrin did not come on the train from the county seat."

"Then if he, through some hocus-pocus, got away with the money, the job was done between the station at which I saw him and Sacramento," rejoined Chick.

"Yes," replied Nick, "but not in a tone that intimated that he was convinced that Terrin had engineered the robbery. He walked to the window, looked out a minute, and then said to Gayton: "I suppose there is an assistant or deputy treasurer, who takes charge of affairs while you are away?"

"Yes. My son is my deputy."

For some reason the great detective was not pleased with this statement.

"Was he in the office when you counted the money and placed it in the suit-case?"

"No. I did this before the regular time for opening. My son was then at home."

"How did he like the idea of your being your own messenger to Sacramento?"

"He didn't like it. He tried to induce me to send the money by express, and even offered to stand half the expense. Roscoe is a good boy, and he will be terribly grieved when he hears of my misfortune."

"Is he married?"

"No. He is only twenty-two and he lives at home. He is as steady as a clock. He is a son to be proud of."

"Was it generally known in the town that you were going off by train that day with all that money in your possession?"

"Not a soul outside my son and the locksmith knew that I was going to Sacramento with the money."

"How about the locksmith?"

"He is seventy years of age, has plenty of money, and is one of the most honest men in California."

Nick had no more questions to ask. He said nothing for some time, but with his eyes on the floor tried to find some plausible theory that would explain the robbery. Chick, meanwhile, puffed at his cigar, and thought and thought to no purpose.

At last Nick said: "Frank, you have given me a tough problem to solve. I may not solve it, but I shall make a determined effort to do so. My first move will be to locate Dan Terrin. I don't see how he could have pulled off the robbery, but if I can find him, I'll endeavor to ascertain whether or not he is well supplied with money. If he is flush, then there will be good ground for suspicion that he is either the robber, or the director of the robbery."

Gayton expressed himself as satisfied with this arrangement, and soon after took his leave.

The two detectives smoked awhile before anything was said. Chick was the one to break the silence.

"If Terrin got on that train at the station in the San Joaquin he is likely to be in San Francisco at this moment. The big cities are the places for the spending of money. From the fact that he acted so queerly when I saw him I think it likely that he is wanted for some job down south. But that fact wouldn't prevent him from coming to San Francisco."

"No," responded Nick, "for he would be safer here than in the country. He is an adept at disguises, and an officer would have to be well acquainted with him to penetrate one of his concealers. Very likely he is a hop fiend, and we may strike his trail by exploring the dope joints of the town. It is not probable that he knows we are here in San Francisco, and if that is the case we must keep him undeceived. When we leave here we must ourselves do the disguise act."

An hour later Nick and Chick were on the street. They did not leave their apartment together, but went out separately. An elastic program had been arranged, and it was understood that unless something out of the ordinary intervened they would meet at midnight at the house on Mission Street.

The great detective knew that Terrin was a confirmed theater-goer, and that he preferred vaudeville and free-and-easy shows to the higher-priced and more intellectual entertainments. He had sent Chick to the opium territory, while it was his intention to make the rounds of the cheap show-houses, above and below ground.

He was made up to represent a sailor just off his ship, and in the mood for enjoying the sights.

About ten o'clock he entered an underground hurdy-gurdy, and, apparently much the worse for liquor, staggered to a chair, and called thickly for a glass of whisky.

After it was served he pretended to drink it, and then allowed his eyes to wander half-sleepily about the room.

There was no one there he knew, or that he had any interest in.

He was about to arise and start for the door when there came down the stairs the very man he had been seeking.

Dan Terrin, well dressed, clean shaven, and with his grizzled hair cut, walked with easy confidence to the bar, and gave an order for champagne. The order given, he went to a table near Nick's, and taking up an evening paper began to read it.

When the champagne had been set before him he paid for it with a bank-note.

This action might not, in itself, mean anything, particularly the possession of stolen money, for bank-notes were becoming almost as common as gold, but the order of champagne and the air of affluence which seemed to surround the man did induce the detective to believe that he was on the right track.

Terrin drank a glass of champagne, and then, actuated by a desire for amusement—he was in a very pleasant mood—he beckoned to the disguised detective.

"Have something with me," he said.

Nick, with some difficulty, so it appeared, got to his feet, and, by the aid of a table and a convenient chair, reached the seat opposite to that of Terrin.

"Don't care if I do," he replied. "Ain't threw myself outside of any sham-sham-pagony for over a year. Here's the hair off yer head," he added, as he raised his glass.

As he was drinking, a dark-haired young man came down the stairs. He saw Nick's back, and he saw something else, something that made his face pale with fear. Making a quick sign to Terrin, he turned and went noiselessly out of the place.

Nick Carter, whose back was toward the entrance, had no knowledge of the young man's entrance, or his quick departure. But he did see that Terrin had given a startled look just as the champagne-glass was being placed, empty, upon the table.

What did the sudden change of expression mean? Either that the detective's disguise had been penetrated, or that some danger to Terrin had just arisen.

Nick gave no sign that he had noticed anything out of the ordinary. After fumbling in his vest pocket he produced a gold piece, and, holding it up so that the barkeeper could see it, called for the best cigars the place afforded.

As he looked toward the bar he saw out of the corner of his eye that Terrin was regarding him intently.

Nick was now certain that the villain suspected that no sailor sat opposite him. Whether or not Terrin knew that the pseudo mariner was Nick Carter was yet to be determined.

The probability was that Terrin had not discovered the identity of the man before him. But the villain must believe that he was in the presence of an officer of the law, and with officers and men of his stripe there could be nothing in common.

Nick, remembering Chick's guess that Terrin was wanted for some job down south, resolved upon a bold move.

Straightening up, and throwing off all signs of intoxication, he said, clearly and soberly: "Suppose we call this séance off, and come down to business. I know who you are, and I am betting that you are dead on to me. What's the use of making believe? I am a poor man, and if I can make a deal with you, why not?"

"Why not, indeed," said Terrin, now more at his ease.

"I am an officer, but I am no fool. I know on which side my bread is buttered. You know well enough why I am here, and if you have a spoonful of sabe you know that to make an officer, the kind of officer I am, do the right thing, is to treat him right."

Terrin, with a slight smile, asked: "Where do you hail from?"

"Los Angeles," was the quick reply.

The villain breathed a sigh of relief. Nick took comfort from that sigh.

"Any other cop from the south in town?" questioned Terrin.

"Nary a one. The whole outfit below think you hiked for Mexico."

"And how did you find out that I went north?"

"By striking your trail on the San Joaquin."

The answer seemed to satisfy Terrin, for he took out his pocketbook, and, extracting a bank-note, held it up so Nick could see the denomination. It represented five hundred dollars.

"Will this bill put you in good humor?" he asked.

"It will make me want to hit the first train for home," Nick eagerly replied.

"And what will you say when you reach home?"

"I will say that I have been on a wild-goose chase."

"Then take it and go."

Nick reached out his hand for the note, but met with a surprise instead. The note was close to the detective's fingers, when Terrin suddenly drew back, and then something soft, but heavy, descended upon Nick's head. As he sank limply to the floor, a young man, who had been standing behind him, hastily concealed a sand-bag.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR CONFESSION.

The hurdy-gurdy room was long and narrow. The tables for the drinkers and card-players were near the entrance. Beyond was an open space now being used by four dancing couples, all in a hilarious condition of mind. None of these had witnessed the assault on the man in the garb of a sailor, and the barkeeper himself was ignorant of what had occurred. When the young man

who had entered suddenly was raising the sand-bag, the dispenser of liquid refreshments had his back turned toward the doorway. He might have been surprised if he had seen the assault, but he would have cheerfully accepted the explanation of the man who dealt the blow.

As Nick went down with senses all askew, Terrin stepped forward, and grasped the hand of the assaulter.

"Good for you, Dick," he said, in a low, agitated voice. "Who is the mucker? Do you know?"

"If I hadn't known I couldn't have warned you," was the reply. "He is Nick Carter. I knew him at once by a scar on the back of his neck. I was a kid when he got it, and I saw it once after the wound had healed."

Dan Terrin uttered an ejaculation of mingled amazement and terror. But the more disturbing feeling soon fled. The great detective was in his power.

The villain knew the place he was in, and he knew what course to take. The hurdy-gurdy was near the water-front, and was a notorious crimping-joint. Here sailors were shanghaied, and here were all the means of settling the case of the dreaded man-hunter.

The barkeeper was called, and to him Terrin said: "We did not need knock-out drops for that geezer," pointing to the unconscious man-hunter. "He carried too big a cargo for comfort. The close air down here must have sent him off. A Chilian bark will sail to-morrow morning. We must hide him up-stairs somewhere until I have fixed up matters with the captain."

"There are three vacant rooms up-stairs," replied the barkeeper. "Put him in any one of them."

There was a stairway in a corner, and the three men lifted the form of Nick Carter and bore it into one of the up-stairs rooms.

Leaving Dick Hatterly to look out for the prisoner, Terrin hurried away to make his villainous deal with the captain of the Chilian vessel. He had not been gone more than ten minutes when the great detective opened his eyes. He had not been gagged, although his wrists and ankles had been secured with stout cords.

The gas had been lighted, and Nick looked for a long time at the face of the young man who had so cowardly assaulted him. His head was in a whirl, and he did not speak until he had obtained a fair control of his wits.

"What does all this mean?" he asked. "Why have you tied me up? What have I done?"

Hatterly smiled evilly.

"You are Nick Carter. That's an answer to all your questions."

The detective exhibited no surprise at these words. It was not the time for pretense. If he dealt with this fellow at all he would have to speak straight words in a straight manner.

"Who are you?" he questioned.

Hatterly grinned. Then he produced a cigar, lighted it, and after a few puffs, said: "I am a friend of Dan Terrin."

"And Dan wants to get me out of the way, eh? What for?"

Hatterly hesitated a moment before he replied.

"You know well enough. That New Orleans job, of course."

Nick Carter regarded the speaker searchingly. Was he in earnest? Yes, tone and expression coincided. The fellow was not acting.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "if the New Orleans job"—he had heard of a late safe-cracking in the Crescent City, but the detectives there had not communicated their suspicions as to the identity of the operators to the authorities of other States—"is the only job that he has been connected with lately? What about California?"

"You mean the job at Los Angeles?"

"No. I mean the robbery of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars from the treasurer of —— county."

Dick Hatterly started, not with fear, but with amazement. The emotion subsided, and a smile came into his face.

"You are dead off about that affair," he said easily. "Terrin never got a cent of that boodle. If that was what you wanted him for then you'll play a losing game. On the dead level, I'm giving you the straight goods."

Nick stared hard at Hatterly. Could he be speaking the truth? The rascal's smile grew broader as he met the stare.

"It isn't Terrin's fault that the boodle missed his fingers," he coolly continued. "I see no harm in letting you know that he tried to collar the stuff and fell in the soup. He raked the suit-case all right, but the notes were not there."

The great detective was not convinced. Hatterly might be a gifted liar, and yet—and yet his manner did not suggest deceit.

"Was Terrin flush when he attempted to steal the notes?" he asked.

"No. At that time if steamboats were selling for a nickel apiece he couldn't have bought a gangplank."

"Then how did he get the money he was sporting awhile ago?"

"Ah! that is another story," replied Hatterly, with a sly grin. "You may not believe me, but he got the bucks from a woman, and that woman is his wife."

"Sally Slick?"

"Same female."

"Is she in San Francisco?"

"Sure. Anything more? I don't mind answering questions and telling the truth, for what information I may give you won't go any farther. You are booked for a long journey, and it will be many months before you will see this city again."

The statement was not a pleasing one. But Nick

had been in tight places before, and he was not yet ready to give up hope.

"Did Sally come to the coast with Terrin?" he asked.

"No. Terrin met her here yesterday. She had just arrived from the East."

The detective knew her for a woman of exceptional shrewdness and cunning. For several years he had lost track of her.

After a short silence he said: "Would you mind telling me how you and Terrin discovered the reason that induced Gayton to start for Sacramento, and also why Terrin failed to get the money?"

"Not at all," replied Hatterly promptly. After narrating the episode of the lost letter written by the treasurer to Jim Plass, he continued: "Terrin's plan was to board the train at Fresno and loot the suit-case between that place and Sacramento."

"How did he expect to do that?"

"By personating Jim Plass."

Nick Carter was astounded. Here was an explanation which would clear a good part of the mystery that surrounded the robbery. But the improbability of such a proceeding was so manifest that he feared he would have to regard it as a fairy-story told by a past master in the art.

"Do you expect me to believe this?" the detective said, with an expression of incredulity.

"I don't care whether you believe it or whether you put it down as a gauzy lie," was the serene answer. "All the same, it's the frozen truth. Terrin knows Jim Plass, and if you will think a minute you will remember that there is a strong resemblance between the two men. Well, Terrin took advantage of the resemblance, and he made it stronger by the use of make-up materials."

Nick could recall the resemblance. It was a marked one. But would it have deceived Gayton?"

"I can guess what you are speculating about," Hatterly went on. "You think such a game wouldn't have worked. You must bear in mind that Terrin is a fine actor, and that he knew Gayton when both of them were boys. Besides, Plass is not an old acquaintance of Gayton's. They do not reside in the same city, and, therefore, rarely see each other."

"Go on," said Nick, who could but admit that Hatterly was making out a good case.

"Terrin believed he could so manage the conversation on the train that Gayton would have no chance to touch upon affairs concerning which he was ignorant. He further believed, and the result proved that he was right, that Gayton would not care for talk; that his whole mind would be engrossed with the responsibility of the suit-case and that he would prefer not to share his seat with the dearest friend on earth."

"Where was Plass all this time?" Nick questioned, as Hatterly paused.

"I am coming to that. After leaving Tehachapi we hiked to the nearest water-tank station and waited for the night freight. When it came along we boarded it and brake-beamed a passage to Fresno, arriving in that city the next morning. Terrin was taking a big risk, for he is wanted in Los Angeles, but luckily he was not spotted, and when we got to a crib of an old pal of his, disguises were forthcoming.

"The first move on the Fresno program was to find Jim Plass. That was easy. Jim was at the principal hotel, and it devolved on me to call on him and lead him gently into the trap Terrin had prepared for him. Plass never saw me before that day, and when I entered his room as a Los Angeles detective just appointed by the new administration, he took the bait and swallowed it in one gulp. Jim is a brave man, he is square, and he is a stayer, but I never heard that he was noted for either shrewdness or perception. He can chase express robbers all right when there is an open trail, but in the kind of cases you are an expert in, he is like a fish out of water.

"After we had shaken hands I gave Plass a letter purporting to have been written by Gayton. You see Terrin had as a guide the letter we found at Tehachapi, and in the letter I handed to Plass, Gayton's handwriting was so cleverly imitated that at first glance it would have deceived Gayton himself. It stated that the writer had changed his mind about the journey to Sacramento. Instead of going through by train, Gayton would leave the train at Fowler, a few miles south of Fresno, and travel the remaining distance by automobile. And there would be two guards instead of one for the double trip. A capable and trustworthy Los Angeles detective, Mr. Henry Jordan, who would present the letter, would be Mr. Plass' associate.

"Your friend, Terrin, is a very cunning rascal," remarked Nick, as Hatterly relighted his cigar.

"I believe you, my boy," was the prompt reply. "Dan has got a great block."

He looked at the bound detective with a spoonful of compassion and continued: "I would offer you a cigar, but I am afraid you are not in a position to enjoy it."

"Thanks awfully, all the same," said Nick dryly. "Proceed with your yarn. I don't think of cigars while I am listening to you."

"Sensible man. And I am glad that it is in my power to entertain you. I am not all bad." And once more his rather handsome countenance lit up with a smile.

"The letter which Plass read went on to say that I, as Henry Jordan, would accompany Plass to Fowler in an automobile to be hired in Fresno. The arrangement was agreed to, but it was not wholly carried out. In a lonely spot about half-way to Fowler the auto was held up by two masked men, Terrin and his pal, and Plass was knocked out."

"Killed?" exclaimed Nick, in horror and loathing.

Hatterly coolly flicked the ashes from his cigar. "It was not necessary that he should croak," he answered, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "If I had not taken a hand perhaps there might have been bloodshed. But with your humble servant quick to take his cue the trick was worked in great shape. We tied Plass up and took him to a safe place and left him guarded by Terrin's pal. He will be kept there a week and then released.

"In the afternoon when the train from the south pulled into Fresno Dan Terrin entered Gayton's Pullman, and Gayton at once accepted him as Jim Plass. I occupied a seat in the day-coach, and did not see Terrin again until the train stopped at Sacramento. Then I was paralyzed to learn that the big scheme had failed. There were no bank-notes in Gayton's suit-case. Some one had forestalled us. The robbery had been committed before the train reached Fresno."

"You have not yet explained how Terrin managed to explore the suit-case without the knowledge of Gayton," said Nick.

"Hypnotism did the business; Terrin worked the snap—he's a crackerjack in the science—a few miles out of Fresno. He made Gayton open the case, exhibit the contents, and then relock it. When Gayton was again in his normal condition Terrin sat two seats away reading a paper. Gayton at first had an idea that he had been dozing, but Terrin assured him that the doze could not have lasted more than a few seconds, for they had been talking up to that time."

"Is that all?"

"That's all," replied Hatterly.

Nick Carter looked at the composed face of the rascal as if he would read the secrets of his soul. Hatterly bore the scrutiny well. "You may have spoken the truth," said the detective, after a long pause, "and you may have manufactured the story out of whole cloth. The story is plausible, and as you are counting on my sequestration for a long period there seems no good reason why you should wish to hoodwink me. By the way, have you any idea where the money went?"

Hatterly was evidently expecting this question, for he leaned back in his chair and shut one eye.

"Now you are treading on delicate ground," he said. "I have told the truth up to now, and I have no more disclosures to make."

"That means that you have a shrewd idea of what has happened to the money. You have confessed so much, why not confess all?"

"I don't have to," returned Hatterly coolly. "I have said that neither Terrin nor myself had anything to do with the robbery, and that's all I am going to tell you. If we have made any discoveries since our arrival in San Francisco that is a matter that does not call for publicity."

These words did much to convince Nick that Hatterly had not been deceiving him. But the confession did not improve his own situation. Terrin wanted the detective out of the way on account of the New Orleans job, and there was little likelihood that the master villain would alter the program that had been arranged.

It was not long before Terrin returned. He was in high spirits, and, on entering the room, said gleefully to the prisoner, "Your ship sails to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER IV.

SAVED BY THE EARTHQUAKE.

"What do you think?" said Hatterly to Terrin, after the master villain had seated himself. "This fellow, Carter, wasn't after you on account of the New Orleans rake-off. He aimed to run you in for the Gayton robbery."

"What?" exclaimed Terrin, in astonishment that was not simulated. "How did he get that fool notion into his head?"

Hatterly told him. At the conclusion of the story Terrin looked sharply at his confederate.

"Did you tell him anything more?" he asked sternly.

"No—that is, I didn't give away any secrets of consequence."

Terrin was not satisfied with this answer.

"See here, Dick," he said, "you are a well-meaning gazabo, but your mind isn't strong enough to cope with such a keen one as Nick Carter's. I know Nick of old, and I owe him one for a little work done when we were kids. I'll bet he has wormed something out of you."

"What if he has?" replied Hatterly, in some heat. "He is going where he won't be able to make any use of the knowledge."

"What did you tell him?" demanded his partner, an ugly frown on his face. "Come, spit it out. I have got to know. See?"

"I did not tell him anything. But I may have said something which makes him think that we know where Gayton's money went."

"But he doesn't know what we have discovered, what we suspect?"

"No."

"Then it's all right," said Terrin, in a tone of relief. "You must understand, Dick," he added, "that I sha'n't feel safe until I see Nick Carter on board the Chilian vessel and sailing out of the bay."

"Could you manage to give me an interview with Sally before I start on my voyage?" asked Nick quietly.

Terrin's evil countenance turned pale. He bent a look of mingled fear and suspicion on the face of the detective. Nick's expression was placid. Terrin stamped his foot in rage.

"Why do you talk of Sally?" he gruffly demanded. "She knows nothing of affairs here."

"Are you sure of that?" questioned the prisoner, with aggravating suavity. "I hold to a different opinion. Let me have a talk with Sally and see if I am not right."

Terrin scowled and shook his head. "You'll see no one," he rejoined, "until you are introduced to the captain of the bark. So shut up. I don't want any more of your lip."

Nick smiled to himself. If he should be fortunate enough to escape from the toils with which he was surrounded, he resolved to institute a search for Sally Slick. He believed that this woman, Terrin's wife, held the key to the mystery.

About midnight Terrin left the room, promising to return at five-thirty in the morning with the captain and a closed carriage. In this carriage Nick was to be taken to the wharf and shipped for Chile.

There was one single bed in the room. Nick lay upon the floor. Hatterly sat in a chair and looked longingly at the bed. But he did not avail himself of the comfort it offered.

Conversation languished after Terrin's departure. Nick tried to induce his guard to talk, but Hatterly was tired, sleepy, and in bad humor, and his answers were short and non-committal.

As the hours passed the detective made strenuous attempts to free himself from his bonds. In vain. Not only did Hatterly keep a watchful eye on his prisoner, but the cords themselves had been put on to stay. At last came daylight, and a close approach to the time at which Terrin might be looked for.

Then something happened, something so utterly unexpected, of such an appalling nature, that all thought of their former relations, of the circumstances of the night, was driven from their minds.

First a slight tremor, producing a shuddering sensation, then a series of violent rocking jolts that shook the building from foundation to roof.

San Francisco was in the throes of the most violent and destructive earthquake in her history.

Seconds of horror passed and still the frightful heave and sway of the earth continued. Amid the cracking of framework and the creaking of supports came the rattle of tumbling furniture, the clatter of shattered chimneys, and the crash of falling walls.

The roaring noise, the staggering vibrations, continued until it seemed that they would never cease. And mingled with the awful undertone of the shaking earth was heard the din of crumbling buildings and successive deafening shocks as massive brick structures toppled to the ground in smoking ruin.

In frantic and demoniacal fright Dick Hatterly, upon the beginning of the quake, had leaped to his feet only to fall heavily upon the floor.

As he lay there within a few feet of Nick Carter the front wall of the building fell outward and the roof caved in, two of the heavy beams falling crosswise upon the body of Hatterly and holding him down as in a vise.

Instinct saved Nick Carter from death. At the first rumble he wriggled backward until his head was under the bed. The flood of splintered timbers, bricks, and plaster covered the bed, but did not cause its collapse, and bruised but did not crush the detective's body.

Even the worst earthquake must come to an end. When the shock was over Nick Carter began to consider his situation. It was a desperate one, for it needed not ocular demonstration to tell him that San Francisco was in ruins and that it might be days before he could be rescued. And there was the frightful probability that the building, wrecked, but partly standing, would soon fall in a heap and bury him in the débris.

As he once more and frantically tugged at his bonds there came from outside the cry of "Fire!" Immediately came other cries, some from afar, some from near at hand.

Another and even a greater horror than the earthquake was about to descend upon the city.

Nick wriggled out from under the bed. His eyes, in anxious search, swept his surroundings. Hatterly lay groaning close by, unable to turn his head or move his hands.

Hanging by a nail from one of the beams that pinned down the confederate of Terrin, was a piece of tin used as flashing upon the roof.

Nick saw the tin, and his eyes brightened. With considerable difficulty he squirmed to Hatterly's side and raising himself pressed the cord about his wrists to the sharp edge of the tin. He sawed away until the cord broke. A moment later his hands were free, and it did not take long to remove the cords about his ankles.

Free once more and on his feet, Nick gave his attention to the villain who had ensnared him. The fellow deserved little consideration, but he was a human being, and the great detective never harbored the thought of leaving him there to die.

Moments were precious, for the fire without was spreading and would soon reach the building the two men were in. Nick might lose his own life in attempting to save Hatterly, but the dread prospect did not cause him to falter in his purpose. He tried to move one of the beams that held the young man down, but though his strength was prodigious he failed to budge it.

A broken piece of scantling caught his eye. In an instant it was in his hands and he was using it as a lever to throw aside the beam. His effort was successful, and he was soon dragging the injured and unconscious Hatterly toward the stairway.

As he reached the landing a sheet of flame swept into the room he had just left. Below was a mass of débris

which blocked the stairway. But beyond was light, for the street door was open.

Lifting the limp form of Terrin's confederate, the detective pushed forward. The fire was behind him, and his only chance to gain the sidewalk was a slim one. When it became apparent that to preserve his own life he must drop his burden, he would do so, but so long as a chance remained to save Hatterly from a horrible death he would not desert the injured man.

As Nick was making his way through and over the débris Hatterly opened his eyes and spoke.

"Leave me and save yourself," he said faintly. "It doesn't matter."

"I'll get you out of here if I can," replied the detective firmly.

Another moment and the flames showed at the head of the stairway.

With a superhuman effort Nick Carter plunged forward, thrusting aside broken timbers with his shoulders and kicking out of the way the obstructive accumulation of lath and plaster, and then, with his burden, tumbled through the doorway to the sidewalk.

Strong hands grasped him as he was about to fall, and with Hatterly still in his arms he was dragged across the street.

As he reached the opposite sidewalk the building which had towered over the underground saloon fell with a crash, some of the bricks striking the curbing by the detective's feet.

He had escaped death by a hair's breadth.

The person who had so promptly assisted Nick was a tall, broad-shouldered business man with a shrewd, genial face.

"Narrow squeak, that was," he said. "Your friend appears to be badly hurt. I'll try to hunt up a cab for you." He was about to start away when a sudden thought made him put his hand in his pocket.

"Here," he added, as he drew out a handful of gold pieces. "Help yourself. You are probably broke, and just about this time money is money."

The detective's fine face flushed with pleasant emotion at this exhibition of generosity.

"Thank you," he replied quickly, "but I am in no need of money. I have on my clothes, you see."

"All right, then. There will be plenty others who will need it. So long," and he was off.

The fire did not threaten the side of the street Nick was on, and so he concluded to wait until he saw some kind of conveyance or until the good Samaritan who had just left should return with one.

Hatterly was lying on the walk, groaning. The detective bent over him and asked: "Where are you hurt?"

"My ribs are crushed, and I am about gone in," was the answer.

Nick made a superficial examination, looked at the young man's face, and came to the conclusion that death was near.

"Hatterly," he said gravely, "you have but a short time to live. Wouldn't you feel better if you told me everything that has any bearing on the Gayton robbery?"

"Ask me any questions you like, and I will answer them," replied the other.

"Did you tell the truth when you said that neither you nor Terrin stole the money?"

"Every word of my conversation with you last night was the truth." The words came faintly.

"But you intimated that Terrin knows the thief. Who is he?"

"See Sally Slick."

"Did she do the job?"

"No, but—but"—Hatterly tried to finish the sentence but could not. There came a rattle in the throat, the jaw dropped, and he was dead.

Nick looked up and down the street. There was no person near at hand. No one was looking in his direction.

Believing that the end justified the means, the detective rummaged the dead man's clothing. He found a purse with a small sum of money. This he returned to the pocket from which it had been taken. There were no letters, but on the fly-leaf of a memorandum-book was written Hatterly's name and address. The address was No. — Howard Street. No use of the leaves in the book had been made. Nick put the book into his pocket just as a cab came round the corner.

"I had the luck to strike this cab," said the generous San Franciscan," in the nick of time. "We'll hoist your friend in and take him to the hospital. The fire isn't burning that way now, though there's no telling what the wind may do."

But it was to the morgue and not the hospital that the body was taken. After parting with the San Franciscan Nick hurried in the direction of Market Street, the principal thoroughfare of the city. He noted without surprise the awful havoc created by the earthquake, but he viewed with apprehension the inroads that the fires, which had started up in many directions, were making.

His course lay toward the Mission district, now partly in ruins, but destined before forty-eight hours to be wiped out of existence. As he went along he looked at the faces of the dead and the injured as they were being removed from shattered and burning buildings. All were strangers. Chick might be safe.

At his own quarters on Mission Street, he found chaos. The building had fallen, but he was informed that no lives had been lost.

He looked for Chick in the crowds, but without avail.

At eight o'clock he reached the Howard Street house given as the address of Dick Hatterly. It was a mass of

ruins. Fire had finished what the earthquake had begun.

Across the street a number of bodies were laid out on the sidewalk. Nick went over and looked at them. Some of the victims were men, others women. They were all dead but one. This was a woman, and at sight of her Nick drew a deep breath. She was about thirty years of age, was flashily dressed, and had once been handsome, but evil courses had set their marks upon her and her beauty had fled.

She had been dreadfully injured about the body and was now in a dying condition.

Nick sat down by her side and took one of her hands in his.

"Sally," said he, "do you know me?"

The woman did not open her eyes, but there was a slight movement of her chin.

Nick spoke again with his mouth close to her ear.

"Sally," said he, "I want you to tell me who robbed Frank Gayton. Did you?"

She made an effort to shake her head, then the hand which the detective was not holding was raised and placed against her breast. Nick, watching her, saw her forefinger crook and tap her shirt-waist of brown silk.

Believing that he understood the action, he loosened the waist and saw the end of an envelope. Drawing it out, his eyes sparkled with satisfaction as they fell upon the address. "Frank Gayton, St. Nicholas Hotel, San Francisco."

"Did you write this?" he asked, quickly and eagerly.

There was a faint shake of the head.

"But you know who wrote it?"

The chin nodded.

"Who is the writer? Does the letter give the name?"

There was neither a shake nor a nod. The woman tried to speak, but the effort was a failure.

Nick remained a few minutes more at the side of the injured woman, and then gave up hope of learning anything more from her.

A reading of the letter might contain the explanation he needed.

Before he left the spot he saw the woman placed in a cart and driven toward the Mechanics' Pavilion which had been converted into a temporary hospital.

As soon as he could find time he resolved to go to the pavilion and see her again. Perhaps she might find her voice before death stepped in to still it forever.

But fate decreed that the great detective should never again look upon the face of Sally Slick. The fires then raging in various sections of the city were soon to become the imperious, remorseless sport of the winds, and in the holocaust to fall upon San Francisco the Mechanics' Pavilion, with scores of wounded human beings brought there as patients, was to become a heap of ashes.

But where was Chick? If alive, where must he be looked for?

Nick went hither and thither through scenes of devastation, scrutinizing the faces of the dead, asking questions of the living, and narrowly escaping death a score of times in penetrating wrecked and burning buildings to assist in the rescue of the imperiled.

It was afternoon when he arrived in front of the City Hall. That immense, imposing structure was a ruin. The earthquake had destroyed it, and the fire was soon to make ashes of the timbers behind the walls.

Nick, with a sigh, hurried to the St. Nicholas.

On the sidewalk, in front of what remained of the tall building, he found Frank Gayton.

CHAPTER V.

A CHASE AND AN ACCIDENT.

Gayton smiled as he greeted Nick Carter. "Quite a shake, wasn't it?" he said. "But it never fazed me. I'm used to 'em."

"Where were you at the time? In bed?"

"No. I was on the street. Got up early because I couldn't sleep. That robbery has got on my mind. I was a block away from the hotel when the quake came. After it was over I got my things out of the hotel—luckily they were not covered up—and had them sent to a friend of mine on Fillmore Street."

"Have you seen Chick?" asked Nick.

The answer lifted a heavy weight from the great detective's mind.

"Yes, I saw him about an hour ago. He had struck Terrin's trail and said he hoped to run the fellow down before night. He had found out in some way that you were alive and, expecting that you would hunt me up, asked me to tell you that he would show up this afternoon or evening at my new crib on Fillmore Street."

"Good. And now, if you have no business on hand we will go on to your new quarters."

Gayton had no business on hand, and half an hour later the two men were sitting in the reception-room of the Fillmore Street house.

Nick produced the letter taken from the person of Terrin's wife and handed it to Gayton.

Opening it quickly, Gayton read it in amazement and perplexity.

"This beats me," he said. "See what you can make of it."

Nick took the letter, which was without date, and read the following:

"MR. FRANK GAYTON.

"DEAR SIR: I am sorry, very sorry, that necessity should have compelled me to relieve you of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars in bank-notes. If I were by profession a thief I would not take the trouble

to write you a line about the robbery, and I should never think of apologizing for the action which has made you worse than a pauper. I am no vulgar thief. This is my first crime against the laws of the land. I needed the money which you took out of your safe to convey to Sacramento. But—and I desire that this statement should be believed—I needed it for a pressing present emergency. To be plain, I did not steal the money. I borrowed it. Before the year is out I hope to pay it back.

"You may infer from what I have already written that I have entered upon some large speculation. The inference will be correct. And the speculation is entirely safe. What it is I must not tell you. No more must I tell you who I am, nor how I contrived to take the notes from your suit-case without your knowledge. The sole object of this letter is to ease your mind, to show you that you have no need to hire detectives to try to recover the notes and run down the person who took them. I am beyond suspicion. Discovery I do not fear. Be not cast down by your loss. Your unfortunate condition shall be relieved before the opening of the rainy season. Brace up, rely on me and you will yet be happy.

"THE UNKNOWN."

"A woman wrote this," said Nick, "and I think she has written what was in her heart."

Gayton's countenance glowed with hope and delight. "Then I may get back the money. Is that your opinion?"

"If I answer you offhand I may have occasion in the future to revise my opinion. But my idea is that the woman is really sorry for you, not sorry enough, however, to make immediate return of the stolen money. The letter shows that she is not case-hardened."

"Everything depends, then, on the speculation in which she is engaged?"

"So. If she had kept secret her crime of robbery she might have been able in time to repay you. But she saw fit to make a confidante of an unscrupulous woman. That woman may now be dead, but it is probable that what she learned is now within the knowledge of Dan Terrin. If I am right in this conjecture and Terrin should succeed in eluding Chick and making his escape from San Francisco, he may and probably will prevent the unknown writer from carrying out her plan of restitution."

Gayton's face fell. He said nothing for a few moments. Then he put this question:

"How did you arrive at the conclusion that the letter means what it says?"

"Both from a review of the circumstances surrounding the affair of the robbery and the persons suspected of having in some way been connected with it, and a study of the letter itself. The manner of writing clearly shows that the writer wrote without hesitation and with firmness. This condition presupposes earnestness and suggests sincerity.

"Why should the letter have been written if the writer did not wish to express her honest thoughts? If she intended to deceive you, what could be her object? She could not hope that such a letter would induce you to dispense with my assistance and drop all investigation. And it is folly to presume that merely for the purpose of making game of you she would write that which might in the hands of a clever detective become a clue that would lead to her unmasking. Look at the matter whichever way you will, there is but one sensible explanation—the writer meant no deceit."

"What kind of woman is she? Can you picture her?"

"I will make the trial. Her handwriting gives me a clue to her character. She is a woman young in years, but old in experience. She has had a fair education, and has lived among people of refinement. She has high aspirations, but lacks somewhat in the moral sense. I am inclined to think that the evil in her is attributable to faulty bringing up, to bad environment. She is not yet too old to make something out of her life. Left without a proper guide she may fall much lower than she has already done. The woman interests me. I should like to meet her."

"So should I," rejoined Gayton grimly, "and I am afraid that what I would say to her would not savor much of either politeness or sympathy."

Nick Carter smiled. "You may meet her before many days."

"What!" with a start of surprise. "Have you spotted her?"

"No, but I have a notion that this letter will lead me to her. The earthquake may have given me the clue I desired so much to obtain."

Gayton, who had been seated, got up and paced the floor.

"Nick," said he, "I wonder how that woman did the trick? On the way here you told me what you gathered from Dick Hatterly. You don't suppose the hypnotic scheme was twice tried on the train to Sacramento, do you?"

"No. I am willing to accept one demonstration, but my common sense revolts against two of them, each operated by a different person and neither having any knowledge of the designs of the other. The mystery is lifting a little, but there is still darkness in one of the corners, and that darkness is as black as ink. Whether we find Terrin or whether he slips off and never again comes in our way, I shall do two things: I shall hunt up and have a talk with Lafe Bennett, the Los Angeles detective who accompanied you to Fresno, and I shall go to your town and make certain inquiries. I think," he added, after a pause, "that for the present you had better remain away from home."

The serious tone in which these words were uttered made Gayton look at the detective curiously.

"What's in your mind," he asked. "Am I in any danger?"

"In a physical sense, no. But human nature is the

same the world over. It is now known all over California that you lost a very large sum of money while traveling by train from your home to the capital of the State. You have been interviewed by reporters, and you have told them that you never lost sight of the suit-case containing the bank-notes from the moment you placed the notes in the case until you reached the State treasurer's office in Sacramento. You have intimated that a robbery on the train was impossible, and at the same time have admitted that the robbery must have taken place on the train. People who know you will stand by you, but there will be many who will believe that you, yourself, are the robber."

"My God!" exclaimed Gayton, his face pale with dismay and horror, "I never thought of that."

"We must save your reputation as quickly as possible," said Nick soothingly. "Stay here, or go to Sacramento or Stockton and wait until the mystery is solved."

"I'll never go back until it is," asserted the treasurer stoutly. "I will write a letter of explanation to my son, and then start for Sacramento. I will go over to Oakland right away and take the midnight express. My address will be the capital."

Shortly after this conversation the detective went out upon the street, to find that the fires were spreading and that the whole city was threatened with destruction.

He thought of Chick and resolved to go down-town and make a search for him.

It was toward night, and the fire was being fanned by a strong wind. Market Street was a roaring furnace, and the streets south of it, where were the homes of the working people, was a mass of blackened ruins. The mighty blaze was eating its way through the heart of the city, and the dead, buried beneath the ruins of hundreds of collapsed buildings, were left with the imprisoned living to be cremated by the flames.

Nick Carter, making perilous progress toward the water-front, passed thousands of panic-stricken people fleeing for the open country, forgetting everything else in their fear of the devouring furnace behind them.

And if the spectacle was then one of horror, what must be said of it hours later, when the wind had veered and Nob Hill, the remaining section of the Mission district, and the residence section as far as Van Ness Avenue was in the grasp of the destroyer?

What impelled the detective to strike northward in the direction of the old City Hall, Chinatown, and the Barbary Coast, he could never afterward explain. It must have been the working of some subtle inner sense that sent him onward at a run.

The fires that were devastating other sections had not yet reached the dens of vice that clustered about the hills east of Kearny Street, and north of Sacramento Street.

In City Hall Park Nick found an excited crowd of Mongolians who had been driven into the open by the wreck of Chinatown.

He was moving among them when he saw two men emerge from a building on Washington Street, near the Chinese theater and run rapidly up the hill. The men were Chick and Dan Terrin.

The master villain was in the lead, and he was trying to evade arrest.

There were many people in the street, but no one attempted to stop the fleeing man.

In fact, but little attention was paid to the spectacle of the pursuer and the pursued.

The earthquake and the encroaching flames had left them without mind for the ordinary affairs of life. And it was no extraordinary sight to see one man chasing another.

But Nick Carter's mind was as active as ever. Pushing his way through the crowd, he ran to Washington Street and, catching sight of Chick, went up the hill like a race-horse.

Arrived at the Stockton Street crossing, he observed that the race was not in favor of the young detective. Chick had lost ground. He was running, it was true, but not with the speed that usually characterized his sprinting efforts.

As Nick came nearer he saw that Chick's body swayed as he ran. Suddenly the young detective gave a lurch and fell heavily to the ground.

Terrin was now a block away and was making for a motor-cycle standing against the curbing. It had been left there by a policeman who had gone into a wrecked building on an errand of mercy.

Under the circumstances the great detective did not feel called upon to use his revolver.

Chick raised his head as Nick approached. His face was pale, but there was a smile about his lips.

"Don't bother about me," he said. "I am all right. Follow Terrin."

Nick gave his brave assistant one searching glance and then resumed the pursuit.

An exclamation of wrathful disappointment escaped him when he saw Terrin mount the motor-cycle and send it buzzing forward.

There was no vehicle in sight, and, unless a miracle should intervene, the villain would soon be out of sight and on the way to safety.

But something did happen to stay Terrin's rapid progress.

A runaway team suddenly swerved in upon him, and the force of the collision was such that he was thrown high in the air. His head struck the bituminous pavement with a sickening thud, and he lay motionless.

Two hours later four persons occupied a tent in Golden Gate Park. One was a physician and surgeon. The others were Nick Carter, Chick, and Dan Terrin.

The injured villain lay on a cot with eyes closed. He was breathing stertorously.

"What is your opinion, Doctor Thornhill?" questioned Nick. "Will consciousness return?"

"I think so, though it is impossible to make a positive statement. He is suffering from concussion of the brain, and, besides, may be internally injured. The probability is that he will die before to-morrow morning. He may be able to speak just before death. I have done what I could, and if there is more needed I will do it. I am at your service, Mr. Carter, and every half-hour I will drop in and note how the case is progressing. I have other patients, but they are all here in the park and close at hand."

Chick was stretched on the ground at the foot of the couch. A barley-sack filled with straw served for the pillow upon which his head rested.

After the doctor had gone out Nick turned to his assistant and said: "You haven't told me yet how you came to be knocked out."

"I am not knocked out," protested Chick stoutly. "I am only temporarily disabled. I haven't any broken bones, and the bruises don't amount to a hill of beans. It was starvation that bowled me over. I was as weak as a cat when I chased Terrin into that building on Washington Street."

Nick looked at Chick compassionately. Chick blinked his eyes.

"I haven't been trained to get along without eating," the young detective continued. "In my business I require food at least once in twelve hours. Until I tackled those sandwiches awhile ago I hadn't had a bite to eat for thirty hours. When we parted yesterday I struck out for North Beach, and from there made my way down the bay shore until I reached the ferry building. There was the chance that I might find Terrin or get a hint as to his whereabouts from the longshoremen or roustabouts along the wharves, for in the East, where Terrin operated, his penchant for waterside strolls was well known and often commented upon. If he hadn't been a thief by nature he would have been a sailor. Toward night I got on his trail. A wharfinger had seen a man answering his description go on board a Chilian bark, anchored a little way out on the bay. I was getting hungry about this time, but I made up my mind to let dinner go until the Terrin matter should be in such shape as to give me opportunity to hunt a decent restaurant.

"The first thing I did was to hire a boatman to row me out to the bark. I could not make up my mind what card to play until I had seen the captain. He might be an honest man, and Terrin's visit might mean nothing more than an attempt to secure passage on the bark, which I had been informed would sail the next morning. On the other hand, he might be an employer or an accomplice in some plot that had been hatched up between them.

"The captain, a swarthy, beetle-browed ruffian, met me as I climbed to the deck and gruffly demanded my business.

"Now I had my cue. Pretending to be pal of Terrin, I asked if he could give me Terrin's address, that I had some important news to disclose.

"I am a pretty fair actor, as you know, and I succeeded in convincing the surly brute that I was what I represented myself to be, a man who lived by his wits and who was ready to take any kind of a job and ask no questions. I was handed out the infy that Terrin might be found that evening at a hurdy-gurdy on Pacific Street.

"He was there all right," said Nick.

"But I wasn't," was the reply. "I had counted on having dinner and then going to the place and waiting for Terrin to appear, but something happened to spoil my plans. I met Sally Slick, Terrin's wife, and she led me a merry dance."

Nick pricked up his ears. Perhaps Chick had discovered something of importance.

"I was going up Market Street from the ferry when Sally popped out of a furniture-store right in front of me. In my get-up—I was doing the hobo act, you know—she did not recognize me. Her way led up Market to Third. Here she turned and went south to Howard. I followed, and we traveled a mile before she got to her destination, an apartment-house on Howard, in the Mission district. As she opened the door with a key I concluded that she lived in the house. And if she lived there it was probably Terrin's headquarters.

"It is headquarters for ashes now," put in Nick.

"Yes, I know. And I came within an ace of burning up with the building." Nick looked surprised. Chick grinned.

"All the adventures weren't coming to you," he said. "I had one or two of my own. Ten minutes after Sally Slick entered the Howard Street house I was inside and talking with her. But before I went to the door I assured myself that Terrin was not there. I found a kid at a fruit-stand across the way who said he had seen a big, gray-headed man leave the house an hour before. The woman who had just entered the house had parted with him at the door."

CHAPTER VI.

CHICK'S NARROW ESCAPE FROM DEATH.

"I touched the button at the door," continued Chick, "and Sally Slick answered the ring in person. Putting a finger on one side of my nose, I asked if I might converse with her in private.

"She hesitated a moment, then invited me in. We

passed through a long hall, and struck a room at the rear that was neither kitchen nor living-room. The furniture consisted of a carpenter's bench and two cracker-boxes. She pointed to one of the boxes and then seated herself on the other. I did not like the looks of things, but I did not let her know that I suspected a trap.

"'Now, my good man,' says she, 'what is your business with me?'

"I told her that I was working for Dan Terrin, and that Dan had hired me to come to the house and give her a message.

"'Ah,' says she, 'and what may the message be?'

"'The cops are on. Sink the stuff and come to me.'

"She looked at me queerly as I said the words. 'Where is Dan?' she asked, and there was no concern, only ordinary interest in the tone. Thinks I to myself, I have made a bad play. Sally is not biting worth a cent."

"You spoke on the supposition that Terrin was the robber we are in search of, and that Sally knew all about the stolen money?" remarked Nick.

"Correct, and the supposition was wrong. As soon as I realized that I had my foot in it, I commenced to tack. 'Maybe I didn't get that message right,' I says. 'Maybe he said "bluff" instead of "stuff." I thought that might ease her, for I was positive that she was posing to her landlady as a respectable woman. But when she laughed I knew I had not helped my case. She was on to me, that was certain, and her manner convinced me that she had resolved to have fun with me.

"'You did not answer my question,' she said sweetly. 'I asked you where Dan is, and you did not tell me.'

"'I hadn't got to it,' I replied boldly. 'He is on board a Chilian bark in the bay.'

"She started at this, but presently a queer smile came into her face. 'Yes, yes,' she returned. 'I remember that he said he would see the captain this afternoon. By the way,' she continued, 'how long have you known Dan?'

"'Only a few days,' I says. 'Him and me met down near the ferry. He was looking for a man to do some work for him, and the captain of the bark recommended me.'

"Sally seemed impressed by this statement, and I was beginning to gather confidence when she said: 'Let me get you something to drink and then we will start.'

"I knew it would be bad policy to decline the offered refreshment, though I suspected that her purpose was to dope the liquor and put me out of business. I watched her as she took a bottle and two glasses from a little closet in the room, and I was anything but satisfied when I saw her turn her back to pour liquor from the bottle into the glasses. I think she divined what was in my mind as she turned and faced me, for the smile on her face deepened.

"There was liquor in each of the two glasses which she held in her hand. She offered one to me. I took it, but did not drink. I was puzzled how to act. I might have exposed my hand then and there, but to have done so would have been to have lost all chance of finding out what she knew. I could not arrest her, for I had no evidence to show that she was in any way connected with the robbery.

"While I hesitated, a thought came to me. It might and might not help my case. 'From what Terrin let out to me,' I said, 'we are all in the same boat. Therefore, in drinking with you I drink to our better acquaintance. Touch your lips to your own glass, I will touch my lips to my glass, and then we will change glasses. That's the way we do at sea. It's the sign of comradeship.'

"'Certainly,' she replied genially, and in a moment she had my glass and I had hers."

"And you drank?" asked Nick, in marked disapproval.

"I drank, to my shame be it said. I fell head over heels into the trap she had laid for me. She had purposely turned her back while pouring out the liquor in order that I might think that she was doping my glass, and if I had not proposed the change of glasses she would have found some other way to gather me in. I was caught out, sure. Well, I never posed for that impossible creature who never made a mistake. I can ring most of the changes on a criminal's mind, but once in awhile I strike a wrinkle that puts me to guessing."

"You went to sleep, I suppose," said Nick.

"That's what I did, and when I awoke, it was night, and I was in about as sorry a condition as you can imagaine. I was both weak and hungry. My mouth tasted like a sewer. I was in the same room I had entered hours before, and the gas was burning from a chandelier over my head. There was an easy chair in the room, and in it sat Sally Slick. I tried to arise, but found that I had been roped like a fractious steer.

"The noise I made informed my jailer that I was awake. She arose at once. 'Have another drink?' she asked, with maliciously affected solicitation.

"'Yes,' I replied huskily, 'but this time I will take water.'

"She actually giggled at my speech. 'And it won't be the first time that Mr. Chickering Carter has taken water,' she said, with a low laugh. 'Come it over you pretty slick, didn't I?'

"'You surely did,' I responded. 'You were not named Sally Slick for nothing.'

"She gave me a drink of water, and it was not long before I was feeling fairly well. 'What did you come here for?' was the question she threw at me after I had absorbed the Spring Valley.

"'To see you, my dear, and have a heart-to-heart talk. I know you are not so black as you have been painted,

and I hoped to convince you that the straight and narrow path is the path for you.'

"She raised her hands in mock despair. 'What a sad mistake I have made,' she said. 'I never supposed that you represented the Salvation Army when you had that interesting conversation with me about Dan Terrin. Now I understand. You were speaking allegorically.'

"Once more she giggled. That settled it. I came down to bed-rock business. 'Sally,' said I sternly, 'let's quit foolishness and find out exactly where we are at. I came to see you because I believed that you knew something about the robbery on the Sacramento train the other day. Dan Terrin will be in jail before morning. You, too, will be arrested, unless you tell me or the chief of police all you know. You can't make a point by keeping me here, a prisoner, for I am but one of the many detectives who are on the case. Nick Carter knows where I am, and as soon as he lands Terrin he will look me up. So you see you are standing on a precipice. Better cough up and save your distance.'

"There was no smile on her face as she rose from her chair and walked to the window. I had scared her at last.

"Her countenance was serious when she turned and spoke to me.

"'I don't fear for myself,' she said. 'All your talk about the robbery does not affect me. I had nothing to do with it, and Terrin is in the same boat. But he is wanted, as you well know, for other jobs. I don't desire that he shall be caught. I am going out to try to find and warn him. If I succeed I will come back and release you.'

"I tried to get her to talk awhile, but she was determined to leave at once. Before going out she took measures which to her mind made it impossible for me to do any shouting while she was away.

"The night passed, and she did not return. And all the time I was trying to get shet of the ropes which held my wrists and ankles. Try as I would I could not make it. Daylight came, and I was lying exhausted from my struggles, when bang! biff! crash! came the earthquake. The floor sank under me and down I went, Sally Slick by my side. She was just coming into the room when the terrible shaking commenced.

"I fell into a big coal-bin, she on the outside of it. I was protected from the blows and weight of falling timbers, though I was half-buried in plaster and broken laths. In my struggle to get out of the hole I loosened the gag over my mouth, and thereby saved my life."

"You shouted for help, and your voice was heard, eh?" said Nick.

"No. I might have shouted for a year and no one outside could have heard me. My mouth did quite a different service. I managed to roll over to the side of Sally Slick. A heavy beam had knocked her senseless and broken her bones. When I had last talked with her I had observed the handle of a knife sticking from the bosom of her dress. This she had concealed on going out, by the ends of a wide ribbon which hung at her neck.

As I wriggled up to her I saw that the ribbon had become disarranged and that the handle of the knife was visible. With an effort I bent over, took the handle in my teeth, and drew out the knife. Then raising my wrists close to my mouth, I cut my way to liberty. The blade was sharp, and the work was quickly done. Next I severed the ropes which bound my ankles, and when I stood up my relief was so great that I felt like shouting.

"The rumbling had long since ceased, but the smoke that was coming into the basement told me that the house was on fire. I speedily extricated poor Sally Slick from her perilous position, and bore her out of doors and across the street.

"I could do nothing for her, and, besides, the perils of the uninjured then claimed my attention. From the upper stories of houses the forms of men, women, and children could be seen, frantically imploring help. I worked for over an hour, and then hastened to the water-front to look you up. On the way I met Chief Dinan, who said he had caught a glimpse of you a short time before. You were going up Market Street, and I concluded that you were on your way to the St. Nicholas, where Gayton had put up and where you probably expected to find me. Soon afterward I met Gayton and gave him a message for you.

"I went on and at the ferry met the captain of the Chilian bark. He was in a towering rage. Terrin had promised to come to his vessel at four o'clock that morning and had not made his appearance until five minutes before the earthquake. The shock had sent him away without explanation, and now the captain did not know where he was or what had become of the sailor who was to have been crimped.

"'Did you speak to him about me?' I asked.

"The captain shook his head. He had had other matters to think of.

"My mind was now relieved. I told the captain that I would look up Terrin for him if he would inform we where the man might be found. 'I have said that I don't know where he is,' was the savage reply. 'He may be in one of a dozen places. If he was hot for hop you will find him in some of the joints in or about Chinatown.'

"He's there in one of them, sure,' I thought, for the shake and the scare had probably collapsed his nerves and sent him to a dope joint for relief and consolation. So I hiked for Chinatown, and, after several hours search, I found my man on Washington Street. He had just started in at pipe-hitting when I burst in upon him. I must have looked like a wild man, and I was wild, wild with hunger and excitement. Without a word I made a grab for him, and was instantly seized by half a dozen

Chinks. They took me for a maniac, one of the many who had gone crazy over the quake.

"It was in the struggle in that joint that I got the most of my bruises. When at last I broke away from the Chinks who were interfering with my game Terrin was making the dust and ashes fly up the hill. I dashed after him, but my strength was about gone, and half-way up the incline I dropped and just passed out."

Nick's story was even more sensational than Chick's. The young detective listened with breathless interest, and at the conclusion drew a deep breath.

"We're lucky, mighty lucky," was his comment. "I got out of that crib on Howard Street in the nick of time, and you were equally fortunate in your escape from the hurdy-gurdy house. Now, if Terrin will only wake up and talk we may credit the earthquake with something of good."

But for hours afterward the comatose condition was maintained. Nick had given up hope of ever again hearing the stricken villain speak, when the eyes opened and there was a slight movement of the lips.

The doctor was present, and he immediately administered a stimulant.

The great detective bent over the dying man and said: "How are you feeling, Terrin?"

"All broke up," was the answer, and the pale lips tried to frame a smile. "Guess I'm done for?" he added.

Nick nodded his head gravely. Then he spoke again. "Last night I was after you on account of that Gayton robbery. If you did not commit it, who did?"

"Ask Sally."

"Sally is dead."

"Is she?" The intelligence did not seem to surprise the husband. "Earthquake kill her?"

"Yes."

"Then the trail is lost. Sally suspected, perhaps she knew, and she was to have put me wise to-day."

"But you yourself had suspicions. Dick Hatterly said so," persisted Nick, upon whose face the shadow of a great disappointment was slowly coming.

"Dick deals in hot air. We suspected that Sally knew. That's what our suspicions amounted to."

"And you can't give me any clue that, if followed up, might lead me to the robber?"

"No. I have no idea who the robber is."

"Could a woman have committed it?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Had Sally any friend smart enough to have plotted and carried out a job of that character? Think well before you speak."

Terrin did not reply for several moments. His voice had been feeble before. Now, when he spoke, it was clearer, stronger.

"I will have to consult my attorney before answering your last question," he said.

The doctor, who had kept his eyes on the injured man during the conversation, now said:

"There has been a surprising change for the better. An hour ago I should have said that the man was dying. Now his condition is such that he has an even chance for life."

Terrin smiled. "The chance is more than even, doc," he rejoined. "I am going to get well."

Nick Carter walked to a chair and sat down.

Terrin turned his head, and gazed at the detective mockingly.

"Under the circumstances," he said, "I think that we will consider this interview as indefinitely postponed."

CHAPTER VII.

AN AMAZING DISCOVERY.

Utterly exhausted by the wearing experiences of the past thirty-six hours, Nick Carter and Chick stretched themselves on the grassy floor of the tent and snatched a few hours' sleep.

The doctor remained by the side of his patient while the detectives slumbered. The park was beyond the zone of high excitement, and the early morning which saw San Francisco's fiercest flames found scenes of peace in the great wooded enclosure that stretches from Stanyan Street to the Pacific Ocean.

At seven o'clock Nick was up and ready for the strenuous work of the day. While the doctor was away looking up material for breakfast, Chick was awakened by a shake of the shoulders. He had been sleeping like a log, and he opened his eyes with difficulty.

"All right, all right," he grumbled. "But"—and he looked at Nick with a sheepish grin—"I would like to lie here a month and do nothing but sleep."

Terrin was awake, and his eyes were bright. He watched the movements of the two detectives with amused interest.

Nick asked him how he felt.

"Not exactly like a fighting-cock," he smilingly replied, "but much better than the average mutt with a cracked head. How are *you* coming on?"

"So well that I think I shall easily beat you at the finish."

"Made all your bets?" Terrin's eyes twinkled, and he showed his teeth.

"All but one, and that's a big one."

"What's the amount?"

"One hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars."

"It appears to me as if you had already made that bet, and that you are now inwardly beefing because the stakeholder has run off with the money."

Nick replied in a pleasant voice: "Don't excite yourself over the thought of that money. The mysterious person who is now in possession of it may prefer to give it up

to me rather than run the risk of having it stolen by you."

Terrin's smile departed. He turned his face away, and said no more.

After breakfast, consisting of coffee and sandwiches, Nick and Chick left the park. The great detective's first business was the procurement of a policeman to stand guard over the tent that held Dan Terrin. There was little danger that the villain would be able to move from his cot for several days, but Nick did not desire to take any chances. Terrin must be held a prisoner until officers from either Los Angeles or New Orleans should come for him.

Nick and Chick would have liked to have given immediate attention to the work of solving the mystery of the Gayton robbery, but the prevailing excitement about to reach its culminating point compelled a quick alteration of plan. The fire which had raged fiercely during the night now threatened to lay waste every part of the city. Nob Hill was destroyed, every structure between Kearny and the bay and as far out as Broadway had been burned and the flames were reaching out into Van Ness Avenue and imperiling the Western Addition.

Water-mains had been destroyed, and the firemen were powerless to cope with the appalling situation. There was but one thing that could be done, and that was the dynamiting of whole blocks in the path of the conflagration.

Nick and Chick, standing upon elevated ground beyond the fire zone, looked down upon fifteen square miles of burned and blackened territory. Where two days before had been a mighty metropolis there now appeared one vast field of ruin.

The air was burning hot and black with smoke, and the wind blew cinders in their faces.

"This won't do," said Nick, with a set face. "Men are wanted below. We must do our part. Come on."

And into the thick of elemental orgy and stubborn, courageous battle of cornered intelligence they went.

Many of the streets were impassable. Tottering buildings were everywhere, some of them leaning so far out of the perpendicular that every minute their fall seemed imminent. The city was now under military law, and soldiers, thousands of extra policemen, and an army of civilians, were directing what appeared to be an impossible fight against the flames.

Out Valencia Street, toward which one tongue of the fire was eating resistlessly, the two detectives bent their steps. They skirted great yawning fissures that stretched ominously for hundreds of yards along the roadway, and passed mounds where the earth's surface had been subjected to a gigantic squeeze, and on through masses of terrified people until they found work for hand and brain.

The scenes they passed through that day will never be forgotten by either of them. They were here, there, everywhere, and the lives they saved, the help they gave to the helpless and the assistance they rendered to the flame-fighters made the material for one of the brightest pages in their history.

Late in the afternoon, when the fire had been stayed and a fringe of the great city had been saved from destruction, they turned their flushed and blackened faces toward Golden Gate Park.

They were walking along Fillmore Street, now the business thoroughfare of all that was left of San Francisco, when their eyes fell on a handsome young woman who was staggering under the weight of a heavy telescope basket.

She was on the opposite side of the street, and a roughly dressed man suddenly appearing from behind a small square enclosure made of bricks and used as a temporary kitchen, one of the thousands of makeshifts, on the street and sidewalk from Valencia Street to the park, made a dash in her direction.

He had the young woman by the arm, and was saying something to her in a fierce, commanding tone, when she gave utterance to a scream of terror. The man instantly dropped his hand and seized the basket.

Other people, attracted by the woman's cry, rushed to her assistance, but Nick and Chick were the first to reach her side.

One powerful blow from Nick's fist sent the ruffian to the pavement.

Chick stood over him ready to supplement the punishment, while Nick gave his attention to the woman.

She was very pale, but her large, dark eyes swam with gratitude as she turned to thank the detective.

"I believe," she said, "that the fellow wanted to rob me!"

Her voice, a deep contralto, affected Nick strangely. He had heard a voice like that, but when, where, he could not then remember. The young woman—she was not more than twenty-five—was fashionably attired, and her countenance showed refinement as well as world-knowledge.

"Will you permit me to assist you?" the detective asked. "The basket is heavy. I am going your way—you are bound for the park, I presume—and can easily carry it."

The woman hesitated for a moment. She could make nothing of the blackened face, but the eyes seemed to reassure her.

"I shall be pleased to accept your kind offer," she said.

The ruffian who had annoyed her was now trying to get to his feet. Chick gave him a kick, and with a howl he flattened out again.

"Go on, we'll attend to his case," spoke up a workman, who was one of the crowd that had gathered about

the young woman and her protectors. "There's a trough across the street. We'll give him a ducking, and then kick him from here to Ocean View."

Nick laughed, and then taking the basket walked along by the young woman's side. Chick stayed behind to watch the ducking, but caught up with Nick before many blocks had been traversed.

At Golden Gate Avenue the young woman stopped. Her eyes were on an automobile standing in front of a residence. The owner was about to step into it.

"I want to go to San Mateo," she said to Nick, "and I am going to ask that man to take me to the railway station."

"That will be Ocean View to-day," returned Nick. "It's a long drive."

The woman did not hear him. She was walking rapidly toward the automobile.

The owner of the machine was young and impressionable. He had urgent business in another part of the city, but the rich contralto voice and the appealing eyes could not be resisted. He promised to give the required assistance.

Nick deposited the basket in the auto, and saw the young woman depart. Her parting words were: "I shall never forget your kindness. If you ever come to San Mateo, I shall be delighted to see you. My name is Wilkinson, Flora Wilkinson, and I shall go to the house of my aunt, Mrs. Sturtivant. Good-by."

Nick heard the words, and a great light dawned on him. With a bound he reached the side of the auto now in motion.

"I have made a mistake in the man. He wants to rob me," cried the woman, and as the words left her lips she seized a wrench lying at her feet, and leaning over struck the detective a savage blow between the eyes.

As he staggered back to fall into the arms of Chick, the auto went forward, and in a minute was at full speed.

"Leave me, and stop it!" gasped Nick, as Chick dragged him to the sidewalk. "She is the robber, and that basket contains the stolen money."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY.

A number of men came up as Nick spoke. Chick asked them to attend to his friend's wants, and then sped down the street in the wake of the fast-going auto.

He looked around for a horse and saw one attached to a dump-cart. The owner had just unloaded a lot of household goods taken from one of the houses in the burned district before the flames reached it.

"I'll give you ten dollars," he gasped, as he came up to the man, "if you will catch up with that automobile."

The man looked down the street and shook his head.

"Twenty, thirty, fifty, if you make it," cried Chick.

The man's countenance changed instantly. Doubt fled. "I'll make it, or kill the plug," he said. "Hop in, and away we go."

Chick jumped into the cart, the man took his seat, and the horse, a tough mustang, that was by turns saddle-horse and draft-horse, sprang forward under the lash of his master's whip.

As they plunged down the street, the man kept yelling: "Clear the way! Business for General Funston!"

The mustang, excited by the cries as well as by the whip, turned his trot into a gallop, and the cart went on like the wind.

But, alas! for all of Chicks' fine hopes. The cart was actually gaining on the auto, when a loud dynamite explosion, a few blocks away, took all the horse-sense out of the mustang's head. His fore feet went up, he swerved, made for the sidewalk, and, colliding with a telegraph-post, overturned the cart and sent Chick and the driver pell-mell against an improvised lemonade-booth. Over toppled the frail counter, and in the wreckage of flimsy boards, glasses, and bowls, and deluged with lemonade, lay the young detective and his companion.

Severely bruised and filled with a raging disgust, Chick crawled out of the débris and looked down the street.

The auto was not in sight, and, of course, it had not gone in the direction of Ocean View. The episode which marked the undoing of Nick Carter had, of necessity, changed all the young woman's plans.

Believing that a further pursuit would be a sheer waste of time, the disgruntled Chick made his way back to Nick.

The great detective was found sitting on the curbing mopping an aching head.

"It's a wonder that beautiful fiend didn't smash my skull," he remarked, as Chick stepped in front of him. "If a man had wielded that wrench I believe I would have been a dead one at this minute. Had an accident?" glancing humorously at Chick's face, which, streaked with lemonade and soot, was certainly striking, if not beautiful.

"My lacerated feelings say that I have," responded Chick, with a sour expression. "Had a tip-over."

"Well," remarked Nick, after he had listened to his assistant's tale of woe, "we have had hard luck, and that's no lie. But we are not yet beaten. I'll run down that young woman, my boy. She is smart in some ways, but I know who she is, and I'll get her yet."

It was not until they reached Golden Gate Park and the wits of both were clearer that Nick satisfied Chick's curiosity.

Lying on the grass in the shade of a large cypress, the great detective said:

"When the woman spoke in that contralto voice of hers, she struck a chord in my memory. The voice was

peculiar and familiar, but at the moment I could not place it. But when she said her name is Wilkinson, everything became plain. It is a fact known to a very few people that Sally Slick's real name was Sarah Wilkinson. Once, in looking up her whereabouts and history, I visited her native town, and interviewed some of her girlhood friends. She was an orphan, and she had but one relative in the world. That relative was a younger sister."

"Ah!" said Chick, "I am getting next."

"The sister never took to evil courses, that is to say, she never had any dealings with the police while she remained in the East. Not having had any interest in her, I, of course, did not try to keep track of her. When and why she came to California I do not know. But she is here, and she went off in that auto, carrying with her a basket containing the Gayton money. And the irony of circumstance! For four blocks I had my hands on that basket."

"She must have had great confidence in you, Nick, or she would never have allowed you to take the basket from her?"

"Hang her confidence! Why didn't my memory serve me when I heard her voice?"

But soon his face took on a serene expression. "We have one advantage, Chick," he said. "She knows that I know her, but she does not believe that I can trace the robbery to her. She does not live at San Mateo. She never intended to go to San Mateo. When she extended that cordial invitation to come and see her at the home of Mrs. Sturtivant, she was talking through her millinery. She had then no desire to see me again. I am going down to Gayton's town, and there I expect to find Miss Fiora Wilkinson."

"But," returned Chick doubtingly, "if she has put you up as a detective, as she must have done, would she not be a double-distilled idiot to go straight to her home? If she has any sense, and we know she has, she would expect you to come down there."

"She does expect me," quietly replied Nick Carter, "and she will meet me with expressions of profound regret for having for one moment imagined that I was a robber. I am certain that she has already prepared a plausible, and, to her mind, convincing, explanation of her murderous attack upon me. To be plainer still—or to be more mysterious, you will probably say—she will be disappointed, perhaps alarmed, if I do not go to her home and see her."

"I thought you said she had no desire to meet you again." Chick was trying to read Nick's riddle and was finding it hard work.

"No more did she, before she discovered that I either suspected, or was fully aware of, her identity. When she struck me with the monkey-wrench she invited me to come down south and pay her a call."

"Oh, come off," said Chick, who was making no effort to hide his irritation. "Show your hand. What have you got? Four aces, or a pair of nineteens."

Nick laughed. Then he said soberly: "I will not mystify you any further. That interesting young woman lives at or near Gayton's home town. How she managed to steal that money I cannot conceive. I have made a guess, but I may be wrong. Let the robbery incident slide for the present. What we are most concerned about is the recovery of the stolen notes and the restoration of Frank Gayton's reputation as an honest man. Miss Fiora Wilkinson assaulted me because she feared that I suspected what was inside that telescope basket. At that moment she wanted me out of the way. Now she does not fear me; in fact, would be glad to see me, for she has hidden the notes, and will deny, of course, that they were ever in the basket. More than that, she will appear to be grossly insulted if any one should have the brazen effrontery to charge her with the robbery. I have no doubt that she deems her position unassailable."

"It looks to me as if it was," Chick gloomily remarked. "You can't swear the notes were in that basket, and if you can't find them, how are you going to make a case against Miss Wilkinson?"

"I live in hopes," replied Nick imperturbably. "She does not know all I know. She does not know that I took the letter she wrote to Gayton from the person to whom it was given to post. And best of all, she is not a full-fledged criminal, and is, therefore, easier to deal with than her dead sister would have been."

"Terrin knows who she is," said Chick, "and he will try to escape, and go down and blackmail her."

"I hope to close the case before he is in condition to take to the road," replied Nick. "But don't bother about Terrin. He will not escape."

Nor did he escape. He recovered from his injury, and was taken to Los Angeles for trial on a train-robbery charge.

That evening Nick managed to get through a telegram to the chief of police at Fresno, Jim Plass' condition was explained, and his rescue requested. The next forenoon the two detectives were passengers on the southbound train.

Nick and Chick went through to Los Angeles. Here they found Lafe Bennett, the detective who had accompanied Gayton to Fresno. His face and manner did not belie his reputation for straightforwardness and honesty.

He was unaffectedly pleased to meet the famous New York detective, and was quite ready to talk of the Gayton robbery.

"I hope you have struck a clue to the mystery," he said, "for Gayton's reputation is gone if the thief is not found and the money recovered."

Respecting the journey from Gayton's town to Fresno he had nothing to impart that would in the slightest de-

gree explain how the robbery was effected. During the ride he and Gayton had been the only occupants of the Pullman, and he was positive that Gayton had hold of the suit-case all the time.

"Have you any theory?" Nick asked.

"Yes," was the reply. "Gayton was hypnotized. Absent treatment, you understand. He thought he was putting the money into the case when he was in his office that morning, when, as a matter of fact, he was putting in the dummy."

Chick turned his face away to conceal a grin of derision.

But Nick looked the speaker in the face, and did not smile. It was after they had left Bennett that the great detective gave vent to the mirth that he had stifled.

He laughed until the tears rolled down his face.

"And the good fellow actually believed what he was saying, Chick."

"Bugs find their way into every profession," returned the young detective. "And yet—you remember that spiel Horatio made."

"Horatio was wise beyond his years, but this is not an occult case, my boy. Now for Gayton's home town—and Miss Fiora Wilkinson."

The next day they reached the treasurer's stamping-ground. It was on a branch line of the railroad, and not half a day's journey from Los Angeles.

No attempt at disguise had been made by either of them. Nick believed that the time for subterfuge had passed.

Proceeding first to the treasurer's office, they found it in the sheriff's possession. The grave suspicions, reflecting on the integrity of Gayton, which were afloat, had alarmed the bondsmen of the absent treasurer, and they had obtained an order of court placing the vaults and office temporarily in the custody of the sheriff. Gayton's son, though not under suspicion, had been politely requested to vacate the premises pending an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the robbery.

Young Gayton was found at his home. He was pale, and there were dark circles about his eyes. Nick, who had made a close and exhaustive study of human nature, became convinced before he had been five minutes in the young man's company that Roscoe Gayton was all that the father had represented him to be. He had come from honest stock, and his life had been blameless.

The detective's encouraging words made the young man's face brighten.

Intensely interested in what Nick told him, he vowed he would himself become a detective.

"You will become a detective's assistant if the answers to the questions I shall ask you will shed any light on the mystery of the robbery," said Nick smilingly.

"I hope you may be able to dig something out of me," replied young Gayton quickly, "but I am afraid you will find me barren of the kind of information you are seeking."

"We shall see. First, do you know a Miss Fiora Wilkinson?"

"Yes." The young man's face did not flush, nor was there any quickening of interest, any sign of suspicion.

"Are you a friend of hers?"

"No, merely an acquaintance."

"Have you ever visited her at her house?"

"Never."

"How long has she lived here?"

"About five years."

"What is her reputation?"

"It is good. I have never heard it attacked. She is a music-teacher and very popular."

Failing to score a point on this lead, the detective tried another.

"Has she been out of town lately?"

"Yes. She went to San Francisco on the train which took father, and was in a ten-story building when the earthquake came. She returned yesterday, and has been telling everybody how fortunate she was. She is a composer of music as well as a teacher, and she took with her to San Francisco the score of an opera she had just finished. It was in a telescope basket, and she escaped with it after the quake, only to have two ruffians attempt to rob her of it while on her way to Golden Gate Park. She thinks there is a fortune for her in the opera, and she would have been crushed, mentally, if she had lost it. You ought to hear her tell of her sensational experiences. They lay over anything I have ever read in a book."

Nick wanted to laugh, but he controlled his feelings, and his countenance was placid and his voice as quiet as usual as he asked:

"Have you ever seen this score of the opera?"

"No. She has never shown it to any one. If she disposed of it she wanted to spring a sensation on her friends."

"I shall visit her after awhile, and perhaps ask to see it."

"Do you know her?"—regarding the detective in some surprise.

"I have met her, and have been invited to call upon her. By the way, there she is now."

The young woman in question was then passing a corner below them. With her was a fine-looking man of middle age.

"Yes, that is she," asserted young Gayton.

"Do you know the man by her side?" questioned the detective eagerly.

"He is Mark Farish, banker and mine-owner."

"Does he live here?"

"No, he is a Los Angeles man."

"Have you ever before seen him with Miss Wilkinson?"

"Several times. I believe he comes up here expressly to see her. They must have business relations."

Nick asked one more question.

"Where does Miss Wilkinson reside?"

"With the family of Jared Lawton, the locksmith, number eighteen, next block. It is a house of two flats. She occupies the upper one, and boards with the Lawtons."

"Her landlord is a locksmith, eh? He may have done some business for your father, then."

"He provided the lock and key for the suit-case which father carried to Sacramento."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLOW FALLS.

Nick Carter, with a new light in his eyes, left Roscoe Clayton, and at the leading hotel of the town met Chick, who had just executed an order his chief had given him.

Chick had been instructed to follow Miss Wilkinson and Mark Farish, and to report where Farish was staying.

"He is here in this hotel," said Chick. "He went to his room a few minutes ago."

"Good. I'll send up my card at once."

The great detective wrote on the card which the clerk handed him his own name and address. The answer came shortly, Mr. Farish would be pleased to see Mr. Carter.

As Nick walked into the mine-owner's apartment he smiled, as he noted the look of curiosity in Farish's eyes.

"I am here on very delicate business," said the detective, as he took a chair. "I am engaged on a strange case, and perhaps you may be able to give me some assistance."

"You may count on me for anything in my power to give," replied Farish heartily. "You are not unknown to me, Mr. Carter. Your reputation is not confined to New York."

Nick bowed slightly, and then proceeded:

"You are interested in mines, I believe?"

"Yes. I have extensive interests in the new mines in Nevada."

"Are you engaged in forming companies?"

"Only one. I have got an option on a big proposition in the Manhattan district, and if I can work out the scheme, I, as well as those with me, will in a short time be worth millions."

"How much money, or its equivalent, do you require?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars. Of this amount four hundred thousand has been already pledged, two hundred thousand by myself, and nearly the same amount by a friend of mine."

"May I ask the name of your friend?"

"Certainly. She wishes the matter to remain a secret for the present, but to you, who in your professional capacity may be likened to an attorney, a physician, or a priest, I will confide her name. She is Miss Fiora Wilkinson."

"I have met her," said Nick, without the quiver of an eyelash. "She is a very intelligent and energetic young woman."

"She is, indeed. And she is fortunate in the fact that a rich relative in the East has recently died leaving her something approaching a quarter of a million dollars."

Nick was silent a moment. Then he asked:

"Has Miss Wilkinson made any advances in cash? Or has she simply subscribed for so much stock, proposing to take it up whenever called upon?"

"She has paid me twenty-five thousand dollars, and has promised to complete her subscription within sixty days."

"Did she pay you in bank-notes, gold, or by check?"

The question was a peculiar one, and Farish would have frowned had not something in the detective's expression sent new, strange, and uncomfortable ideas into his head.

"She paid me in bank-notes," he slowly answered.

"To-day?"

"Yes, not an hour ago."

The two men conversed together for more than an hour, and when Nick Carter rejoined Chick, his manner was confident and his step was buoyant.

"If I were going up against a professional I would not feel half so good," he said to Chick. "But Miss Wilkinson is not only a green hand at the business, but she is something of a fool. She was bold, but she risked too much, left open too many loopholes. Unless I am greatly out of my reckoning, I shall find what further information I require after you shall have had a talk with the ticket-agent at the railway depot and I have spent an interesting half-hour with Mr. Jared Lawton, the locksmith."

Chick's instructions were given, and he started for the depot.

At noon he rejoined Nick at the hotel.

While they were comparing notes, and dovetailing facts and suspicions, a telegram was placed in Nick's

hands. It was from the chief of police at Fresno, and announced that Jim Plass, the express detective, had been found and was in good physical condition. Terrin's pal, the detective's guard, had escaped.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Nick, having ascertained that Miss Wilkinson was at home, presented himself at the door of the flat, and rang the bell. A maid soon appeared, and the detective handed her a card upon which was written: "The person who assisted you in San Francisco wishes to see you."

The maid took it, departed, and Nick waited contentedly, divining what the answer would be.

A few minutes passed, and then the maid reappeared. Miss Wilkinson was at home, and would see him. He was ushered into a reception-room, and there remained alone for over a quarter of an hour.

"Primping, probably," the detective thought, with a hard smile. "Wants to make the best possible impression. I wonder if she will show any surprise when she sees me with clean clothes and a white face. I looked like a native of darkest Africa when we had our little adventure in San Francisco."

Miss Fiora Wilkinson, gowned, as Patsy would have expressed it, "dead swell," and looking as handsome as a picture, was indeed surprised when she looked at the face of her caller.

"I did not give my name," he said, with a low bow, as he arose. "I am Nicholas Carter, detective, from New York City."

Every vestige of color left her face as he spoke. But she quickly composed herself. She was a woman of strong will, and though she knew she was facing a desperate situation, her resolve to make a bold, determined fight to hold her own was strong, unyielding.

"I did not know," she said, sounding the deepest note of her rich contralto voice, "that I had had the honor of being assisted by so distinguished a gentleman as yourself."

"If you had known," replied Nick, with a gleam of his white teeth, "you would probably have struck a harder blow with that monkey-wrench."

"No, no, no," she quickly responded, and with admirably simulated earnestness and sincerity, "I would not have struck at all. I thought you were a robber like that other man who attacked me. I had in that telescope basket something of great value to me—the score of an opera, upon which I have spent the work of several years."

"I am something of a critic in the musical line," said the detective, eying her closely, "and perhaps my opinion on the merits of your production may be worth something. May I see the score?"

"Now?" she asked, but without exhibiting trepidation.

"Yes."

"Very well." She arose as she spoke and left the room.

Nick frowned. Had she really composed an opera? But, anyhow, what did it matter? If she did have the opera, she had made it a good weapon of defense in the eyes of the public. But it would have no value in the eyes of the man who was prepared to expose her guilty secret.

When she placed in his hands the score of the opera which she had composed, the detective looked carefully over the sheets. He was not an expert in matters musical, but he knew a sharp from a flat, and was good at a bluff.

"A cursory examination," said he, after a pause, and Miss Wilkinson was not reassured as she saw his eyes twinkle, "convinces me that there is great merit in this score. I will not take the time now to go over it carefully."

He handed back to her the sheets, and then continued:

"I desire to inform you that when we met in San Francisco I was working in the interest of Frank Gayton. I was then trying, as I am now trying, to find the person who stole from Mr. Gayton's suit-case one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars in bank-notes."

Again her face paled. She bit her lip, and her eyelashes quivered.

"That was a very mysterious robbery," he added.

"Yes," she responded coldly, "and," her expression changing quickly to one of sympathetic interest, "I hope you will succeed in recovering the money."

"I have already recovered twenty-five thousand dollars of the amount," was the startling reply.

"You have?" she almost shrieked the words. "How? Where?"

"The notes were placed in my hands by Mark Farish, the Los Angeles banker. As evidence against the robber they are conclusive, damning. The day before Frank Gayton left this town for Sacramento he received as taxes from the railway company twenty-five thousand dollars, all in notes of five-hundred dollars each, and all the notes running consecutively from one hundred to one

hundred and fifty, of the new issue of the National Bank at Pasadena."

Fiora Wilkinson sat motionless in her chair. A stony despair had seized her.

Nick Carter went on calmly:

"The notes were given to Mr. Farish by Miss Fiora Wilkinson. Where did you get them?"

For answer the cornered woman drew from her bosom a dagger, and would have plunged it into her heart had not the great detective sprang forward and caught her arm.

CHAPTER X.

THE MANTLE OF MERCY.

"Why did you prevent me?" the woman cried wildly, after Nick Carter had wrenched the knife from her hand. "My career is ruined. I have nothing to live for. I can not bear the disgrace. Do me a favor. Take that knife and kill me. I will bless you for it."

The detective led the agitated woman to a couch in the corner. She threw herself upon it, and for some moments nothing could be heard but her violent sobs.

When the paroxysm had passed, Nick spoke in his gentlest voice.

"I am not a public prosecutor," he said. "It is for Frank Gayton to say whether or not you are to go to prison. Perhaps"—she brushed away her tears and looked up quickly—"perhaps he may be inclined to be merciful."

"Will he—will he give me a chance?" She clasped her hands, and looked at him in agonized expectation.

"After I shall have heard your story I will be better able to express an opinion?" was the grave reply.

"Yes, yes," she returned. "You do not know how I was tempted, what my life has been." She looked down for a moment, then, raising her head, regarded him curiously.

"You know so much," she said, "that I am afraid my story of the robbery will not be news to you."

"I think I can tell you how you operated," responded Nick quietly.

"Can you? I should like very much to hear what your theory is."

She was rapidly regaining her composure. A hope had sprung up in her heart, and she nourished it as she listened to the words of the detective.

"You learned from Jared Lawton, your landlord, a garrulous, unsuspicious old man, that Gayton was having a new lock put in his suit-case, and you learned the object. At that time you were wild to make an investment in the new Nevada mines. Mark Farish, whose daughter at one time was one of your pupils, had spoken to you about the glittering outlook in the Manhattan district, and had announced his intention to form a company to work one of the most promising of the mining properties. You will yourself tell me all the considerations that induced you to become a lawbreaker, for I do not know what was in your mind when you resolved to try to steal the contents of the suit-case. But this is certain: You saw Gayton's suit-case at Lawton's shop. You saw the key. You took an impression, and you made a duplicate. You are handy with tools, and you had often watched Lawton at his work. Next you obtained a suit-case similar in all respects to the one owned by Gayton, and, on the morning of Gayton's departure for the capital, you were prepared for the venture that would make you a criminal.

"You had not, you could not, plan just how you would carry out your scheme of robbery, but your mind was made up to obtain, in some way, the bundles of notes before Gayton reached the State treasurer's office at Sacramento.

"You had stuffed your own suit-case with dummy notes, and luck unexpectedly favored you when you went to the depot. You had given out the information that you were going to San Francisco on important business connected with your musical work, so that no suspicion could be attached to the fact that you journeyed on the same train with the county treasurer.

"Gayton was at the ticket-window which looks out upon the platform when you arrived at the station. He was counting out his money at the counter, and talking with the agent. His suit-case was on the platform by his side. There were no other persons in the immediate vicinity. The trainmen were occupied in making up the train, and other would-be passengers were in the waiting-rooms. You saw your chance, and you acted. Stepping up behind Gayton, you softly dropped your own suit-case and took up his. Then, passing him with a bow, you went into the ladies' waiting-room. You did not, at that time, desire to purchase your ticket. There was the chance that Gayton might notice the similarity in the cases and comment upon it. No, you would wait until Gayton had gone to the Pullman."

"You must have been there," Flora Wilkinson said, in the utmost astonishment, as Nick paused. "For you have told just how it occurred."

"If I had been there I believe I would have done better than Lafe Bennett, the Los Angeles detective. I would have had an eye on Gayton while he was at the ticket-office window."

"Mr. Bennett was not at the depot when Mr. Gayton bought his ticket," said Miss Wilkinson. "He did not arrive until after I had gotten on board the train."

"You came early, then. I had inferred as much. You wanted to be ready to take advantage of the first opportunity that should present itself. Well, to proceed: You did not ride in Gayton's Pullman, and you probably smiled to yourself as you thought of Gayton and the care he must be taking of the valueless suit-case. After you arrived in San Francisco, you transferred the notes to the telescope basket, and they were in that basket when I met you on Fillmore Street. I felt sure of this when I started for the automobile after you had given me your name and had invited me to call on you at San Mateo."

She looked at him wonderingly.

"I don't understand. Why should my name have given you that remarkable information?"

"It is the name of your sister, Sarah, and you have her voice. I had seen your sister that morning, and I had received from her the letter you wrote to Frank Gayton. By the way, I have compared the handwriting—I had a trial in court in mind—with the handwriting of a note which you sent recently to Mark Farish. Both missives were written by the same person."

"Yes, yes," she despairingly exclaimed. "I have been a fool as well as a criminal."

"You have certainly not exhibited the shrewdness of a professional lawbreaker," rejoined Nick. "You were bold enough, but you lacked judgment."

"Say that I lacked moral sense, as well as intelligence, and you will not be far from the mark," was her bitter response.

The detective said nothing. He was studying her.

"I will now tell you," she said, after a long silence, "how I was situated and why I stole that money. I am not an unmarried woman, though for business purposes I have represented myself to be one. My name is Mrs. Sinclair, and my husband is in Alaska. We are separated, but not divorced. I have a son, five years of age, and it was for him that I stole that money."

The words came with an effort. There were signs of a breakdown. Nick saw the brave attempt she was making to control her emotion, and his sympathy went out to her.

"Take your time," he said gently.

His tone did much to quiet her agitation. Soon she was able to proceed.

"My son is an invalid. He has, so say the doctors of San Francisco, an incurable complaint, but I have learned lately that in Europe—Dresden—there is a noted physician who is able to cure my boy. His fee is high, very high, and his practise is almost entirely with the dignitaries of the court, but when I heard of the cures he has effected, I determined to raise, by fair means or foul, money sufficient to take me to Europe, and put my boy under the noted doctor's care. You are probably wondering why, when I had stolen the one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, I should arrange to put the money in the hands of Mark Farish, to be applied in the exploitation of a mining scheme, instead of immediately using it for the saving purpose I have spoken of."

"It did occur to me," Nick acknowledged, "that your action needed some explanation."

"If you knew me, knew my besetting weakness, you would understand," she said. "Ever since I have been in California I have dabbled in stocks, mining, oil, and what not. I must have the instincts of the gambler. I cannot take my boy to Europe until next fall. He is in a sanitarium up north, and is slowly recovering from a dangerous and unsuccessful operation. Mr. Farish assured me that, backed by my money and his, he could start work in the mines within thirty days, and that within three months we would have a million dollars apiece to show for our investment. I believed him, and when I was further assured that he would, at any time before next fall, if I so wished, take my stock at not less than par value, I had no hesitation in telling him that I would invest. And I had still another reason for putting the money in a scheme that promised to yield rich returns in the immediate future. I wanted to pay back the one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. I wanted to leave for Europe with something approaching a clear conscience. But now—now——"

"What is the name of the Dresden physician?" interrupted Nick quickly.

"Doctor Josef Dehan."

"I thought so. He is a very dear friend of mine."

The great detective might have said that he had saved both the doctor's life and honor, and that the doctor had such a profound sense of his obligation that he was ready at any time to lay down his life for Nick Carter.

It was in St. Petersburg while working on an international case that Nick had met Doctor Dehan. There had been a conspiracy to kill one of the grand dukes, and the leader of it was Dehan's roommate and fellow practitioner. The doctor, as well as the roommate, was arrested, and though the former was innocent of even the slightest knowledge of the plot, he might have suffered death if it had not been for the intervention of Nick Carter.

Nick had met the doctor several times, and after the arrest the prisoner managed to get word to the detective. The work of establishing the doctor's innocence and securing his realese was difficult, but at last it was successfully accomplished.

"He is in my debt," said the detective, "and I can assure you that he will take your son under his care, and that you will be at no expense."

The much-shaken, but now overjoyed, woman fell on her knees, and would have covered Nick Carter's hands with kisses if he had not risen and assisted her to her feet.

It was some time before Mrs. Sinclair was calm enough to resume her story. Her eyes were red, but her face was flushed, and hope danced in her heart.

"In San Francisco," she went on, "I met, unexpectedly, my sister Sarah. I ought not to have confided in her, but I did. I expected sympathy on account of my poor, afflicted boy, and I did not receive it. But I never suspected she would try to make evil use of the story I told her."

"Perhaps she would never have done so," said Nick. "She died without having told her villainous husband that you had the stolen money."

"I hope you are right. Poor Sarah! She was much to be pitied. I had not seen her for years. Our paths in life were different—or had been different," she added, with a look of shame.

"How came you to give her the letter written to Frank Gayton," questioned the detective, who was desirous of having cleared up every point in the mystery of the robbery.

"I had to give it to some one, and she was the only person I believed I could trust. The letter was not dated, and I desired that it should be posted three or four days after my departure from San Francisco and my return home. Thus it would seem to Mr. Gayton that the writer was in San Francisco on the date given in the letter, and endorsed by the postmark. It was a foolish thing to do, but I pitied Mr. Gayton, although I had wronged and was still wronging him cruelly."

"You did another foolish thing, from a criminal standpoint. You should not have given me your name."

"At the time, I saw no harm in doing so. I thought I was safe from suspicion, and I supposed you were a San Franciscian, and that we would never meet again. And if we should meet, what of it?"

"I think that you regretted your confidence when I started for the auto. Your action implied that you had made an awful blunder."

As Nick was smiling, she could not but smile in return.

"That," said she, "was my first assault upon a human being, as the robbery of the suit-case was my first crime."

Asked where were the remainder of the bank-notes, she said they were buried in the back yard. She had gone out in the evening, and planted them under a rose-bush.

Nick went with her, and stood while she used a garden trowel to unearth the money.

"Take them," she said, as she placed the bundle of notes in his hands, "and believe me, when I say I am glad they are forever out of my possession."

Nick promised to call next day, and was satisfied from her manner and words that she would be at home to receive him.

A telegram was sent to Frank Gayton, and next morning he was at his home, and the recipient of universal congratulations, for Nick Carter, without entering into particulars, had told everybody that the stolen money had been recovered. He had also wired the Los Angeles papers and had given the news to the local representatives of the Associated Press.

Frank Gayton listened to Nick's story, and then said, with emphasis: "That young woman shall not be arrested. She did a most reprehensible thing, but she has suffered for it. She will suffer more in the time to come, but I'll bet she'll be a better woman for the experience. Let her go, Nick. I am too happy now to have any hard feelings. By the way, you and Chick are going to stay with me for a week or two, are you not?"

"We must leave here to-morrow. I should like to stay and rest, but I must see Mrs. Sinclair through her present trouble."

"I am sorry, very sorry." He was silent a moment. Then he added: "Come over to the bank with me."

Nick went. At the bank Gayton wrote a check for five thousand dollars, and handed it to his friend. Nick shook his head.

"But you must," insisted the treasurer.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Nick. "I'll accept a check for one thousand dollars on the understanding that it is to be made out in the name of Mrs. Sinclair."

Frank Gayton stared hard at the serious-faced speaker.

Soon a light of understanding came into his honest face.

"I see, I see," he said slowly. "Nick, it is a queer proposition, a mighty queer proposition, but I'm with you. The woman is broken in mind and in purse. Stern morality says she ought to go to jail. You and I say, 'We are all sinners,' and life is a hard game. So we reckon it will profit us to play mercy and charity, and let the other cards take care of themselves."

The check for one thousand was made out, and soon afterward was in the possession of Mrs. Sinclair.

She left town next day. Nick and Chick went with her, saw the woman's boy, and understood better the feelings of the mother.

Before leaving California, Nick cabled Doctor Dehan, and the reply was given into the hands of Mrs. Sinclair. It read thus: "Will cure the boy. No charge. Dehan."

A sobbing, repentant, grateful woman again knelt at the feet of the great detective.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 509, will contain "Nick Carter Among the Bad Men; or, The Mystery of Injun Pete," ready next week.

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE TIP TOP WEEKLY

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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